

**EASTERN
HIMALAYAN
FOUNDATION**

STATE OF THE YOUTH REPORT 2026

**A Generation on the
Edge of Precarity**



EASTERN HIMALAYAN
FOUNDATION

CONNECT, CREATE, CHANGE
**Reading
Himalaya**
Research & Policy





Eastern Himalayan Foundation is an early stage non profit organisation that supports young people in the Darjeeling and Kalimpong hills to identify and address local issues and access higher education and diverse career opportunities.



Reading Himalaya is an independent Research & Policy Consultancy focusing on Himalayan society, development, environment and politics.

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Report Prepared by: Reading Himalaya: Research & Policy

Reading Himalaya Team:

Dr. Mona Chettri
Dr. Rinan Shah
Pratiksha Thapa

Photographs

Brihat Rai

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Message from the CEO

Putting Young People at the Forefront of Our Development Dialogue

At the Eastern Himalayan Foundation, we believe that the future of the Darjeeling and Kalimpong hills will be shaped not only by the decisions we make today, but by the opportunities we create for young people to lead, imagine and build that future.

EHF was founded with a simple but deeply held conviction:

young people are not merely beneficiaries of development. They are its present and future leaders.

Our vision is to strengthen the leadership of young people so that they can understand the realities of their communities, navigate the opportunities and challenges before them, and play an active role in shaping the future of our region.

This report is an important first step in that journey. If we are serious about putting young people at the forefront of development dialogue, we first need to listen to them. We need to understand their realities, their challenges, their needs and, equally importantly, their aspirations. We need to understand the circumstances within which they make choices about education, careers, migration and their futures. And we need to recognise the structural conditions that enable or constrain those choices.

This report brings many of those realities into view. It reminds us that the young people of Darjeeling and Kalimpong are navigating a rapidly changing world, often with limited information, networks and institutional support. Their aspirations are shaped by their families, communities, the local economy, the changing nature of work, access to higher education and the realities of migration. At the same time, they possess enormous ambition, resilience and potential.

Our responsibility is not to tell young people what their future should look like. It is to ensure that they have the knowledge, opportunities, networks, resources and agency to shape it for themselves.



Mashqura Fareedi
Founder & CEO
Eastern Himalayan Foundation

We are particularly proud of this collaboration with Reading Himalaya. Reading Himalaya is an emerging, female-led, regionally rooted research and policy collective led by Dr. Mona Chettri, Dr. Rinan Shah and Dr. Anisa Bhutia—three scholars from the Sikkim-Darjeeling Himalaya whose academic and research journeys have taken them across institutions and geographies in India and internationally. Their work brings together deep regional knowledge with interdisciplinary and globally-informed research practice.

For EHF, partnering with a research organisation that is of the region, from the region and deeply invested in producing knowledge about the region has been particularly meaningful. We are grateful to the entire Reading Himalaya team for bringing rigour, curiosity and care to this work, and for helping us look beyond individual stories to understand the larger systems and structures shaping young people's lives.

We see this report not as an endpoint, but as a beginning.

It gives us a stronger evidence base from which to design programmes, strengthen institutions and build conversations around what young people need to thrive. It also points towards questions that we must continue to explore: How do young people's aspirations evolve over time? What enables some to translate aspiration into opportunity while others are constrained by circumstance? How are migration, changing livelihoods, climate change and environmental pressures reshaping the futures available to young people in the hills? And what would it take for our educational and social institutions to become stronger platforms for youth leadership?

These are questions that matter far beyond Darjeeling and Kalimpong. The future belongs to young people. But the future we create for them will depend on whether we are willing to understand the world they are inheriting—and whether we give their potential the full fuel it needs to flourish.

If we can do that, young people will not simply participate in development. They will redefine what development can look like—from the local to the global.

That is the future EHF is committed to building.

Mashqura Fareedi
Founder & CEO
Eastern Himalayan Foundation

Message from Reading Himalaya: Research & Policy

Creating collaborative space for research, action and policy

As researchers from Sikkim-Darjeeling Himalaya, the opportunity to work on the State of the Youth Report 2026 came with an immense sense of responsibility towards our youth, communities, and the region we call home. This responsibility extended to research as well; we wanted to generate research that was robust, reliable and representative of the historical, social, political and economic contexts of the region. For us this was not simply an exercise in data collection, analysis and writing. It was an opportunity to realise one of Reading Himalaya's core mission – to be active and equal participants in the knowledge production of and on the eastern Himalaya.

The report raises many important and interesting insights on education, aspirations and careers of the young people of Darjeeling and Kalimpong hills. It offers a window into the lived realities of our youth – their hopes, struggles, opportunities as well as the hustle and determination to make something of their lives, one way or the other. These issues resonated with the research team in different ways – for us too out-migration had seemed like the only option (albeit under vastly different circumstances), we often lacked guidance and role-models, and had grown up in a society where our intrinsic value was measured through academic success. For Pratiksha Thapa, our Research Coordinator, the findings of the report echoed closely with her own experiences as a young person from Darjeeling. For her, it was almost like watching two parallel streams simultaneously – students who were to enter the workforce soon and recent graduates seeking gainful employment. Both faced the same uncertainty, the same waiting game, and eventually migration. How do we break this cycle?

While we may not have all the solutions yet, this report is the vital first step in assessing the status of our youth as well as our region. We hope the findings of this report generate much needed conversations, collaborations and actions on issues that are pertinent to the future of our region.

Generating one of the largest non-governmental data sets on the youth of Darjeeling and Kalimpong hills should have perhaps been a daunting task, but the support of the youth and local community members helped us carry this responsibility through. We express our deepest gratitude to all the volunteers, respondents and community members who contributed to this project.

We extend our gratitude and appreciation to the Eastern Himalayan Foundation for believing in (and funding) research-backed action. **Research is more than numbers and words; it has the potential to transform people's lives. Working alongside the Eastern Himalayan Foundation, we are excited to be leading what we hope will be a new collaborative space for research, action and policy.**

Working on this report created space for us to combine our skills and training as researchers with our knowledge, concern and commitment to the region. We are happy to present a report that is equally rigorous in its methodology and analysis, as it is deeply personal and meaningful, and we hope this report finds resonance within and beyond the region.

Reading Himalaya Team

Dr.Mona Chettri
Dr.Rinan Shah
Pratiksha Thapa



Dr. Mona Chettri
Co-Founder
Reading Himalaya



Dr. Rinan Shah
Co-Founder
Reading Himalaya



Pratiksha Thapa
Research Associate
Reading Himalaya

Executive Summary

Youth in the eastern Himalayan districts of Darjeeling and Kalimpong constitute a generation on the edge of precarity. Young adults are entering the regional higher education system while navigating financial hardships, with limited access to information and support networks and lacking in vital guidance and mentorship.

Despite continued enrolment in the higher education sector, especially amongst first-generation learners, there is an increasing disconnect between higher education and meaningful, sustainable careers for the youth in the region. **Although higher education is widely perceived as a pathway to social and economic mobility, is it delivering on this promise for the students of the region?**

This research was undertaken to:

- Address the lack of robust data on youth demography, aspirations, and career trajectories in the Darjeeling and Kalimpong hills;
- Generate a rigorous assessment of the intersections between social, economic, structural and cultural barriers that impede successful transitions from education to employment.

The study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining a large-scale student survey with in-depth interviews with students, teachers and higher education professionals across the Darjeeling and Kalimpong hills. 12 colleges and 839 students participated in the youth survey, making it **one of the largest non-governmental surveys of college students in Darjeeling and Kalimpong hills to be conducted.**

Findings reveal a landscape of uncertainty around career and future aspirations, one where out-migration for employment has emerged as a major coping mechanism. While migration for employment may reflect agency and adaptability, it often leads to more insecurity and precarity.

Youth precarity is not an individual failure of aspiration or motivation, but a structural and systemic problem shaped by economic and political stagnation, institutional limitations, and socio-cultural norms. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated action across education, employment and community actors.

The report identifies three critical spaces of intervention:

- guidance and mentoring;
- targeted support networks for vulnerable students;
- expanding employment, career and migration awareness.

Eastern Himalayan Foundation already plays a critical role in identifying, supporting and amplifying the skills and talents of young adults in the Darjeeling and Kalimpong hills. The findings of this report can help the Foundation scale up and strengthen the impacts of their existing programs on career guidance, mentorship, institutional navigation and advance gender-responsive approaches that expand aspiration and career choices to all.

Objectives & Rationale

Research Objectives

- To generate data on the socio-economic conditions, education and employment status, aspirations and challenges of the youth in the Darjeeling and Kalimpong hills;
- To gather data on youth-oriented interventions in education, employment, and health;
- To identify barriers to education, skill development and employment.

Research, policy, and development in the eastern Himalayan hill districts of Darjeeling and Kalimpong are constrained by the lack of robust, reliable and accessible data. Unavailability of data can be attributed to five key factors:

Jurisdictional limitations: the Darjeeling and Kalimpong hills fall under numerous jurisdictions simultaneously (state government, Gorkhaland Territorial Authority [GTA], district administration). This leads to fragmented data collection, which is rarely synthesised. Even when data might be available, they are not easily and openly available to the public.

Peripheral location: hill districts are often treated as peripheral to mainstream policy priorities, and may not always be actively included in large-scale surveys or datasets. Thus, while state-level data is easily captured in national datasets, district and/or GTA-level data is not always incorporated. Additionally, many national surveys carried out at the district level are population-dependent. Thus, a district comprising densely populated plains and sparsely populated hills can lead to insufficient representation from all geographies.

Issues/event-based data collection: most non-governmental data collection is small-scale and issue/event-based. While important for understanding a particular issue or phenomenon, they do not provide a comprehensive understanding of larger issues. Additionally, research on the region tends to also focus more on specific issues like tea, tourism, and the Gorkhaland agitation, at the cost of other development-focussed topics.

Regional institutional capacity: regional institutions and organisations may not have the administrative, financial, human resource or digital capacity to generate and host large-scale datasets.

Interruptions: political interruptions (like the 2017 Gorkhaland agitation), and public health emergencies (COVID-19) create challenges and interruptions in data collection.

In particular, policy and programs pertaining to youth education and employment in the Darjeeling and Kalimpong hills are deeply hampered by the limited availability of robust data on youth career aspirations, structural and institutional challenges, socio-economic barriers, and mobility.

Comprehensive research that combines quantitative breadth with qualitative depth is essential to understanding the lived experiences and realities of the youth. Such evidence is essential to identifying emerging trends and structural gaps, which will inform timely, meaningful and contextually-relevant interventions in the Darjeeling-Kalimpong hills.

Background:

Darjeeling and Kalimpong Hills

The Darjeeling-Kalimpong hills refer to the only two hill districts in the state of West Bengal in India. Darjeeling District was created in 1866 by the British, and Kalimpong District was created out of Darjeeling District in 2017. The current population of the Darjeeling District is 18,46,823, and Darjeeling urban area is approximately 1,20,000. The current population of Kalimpong District is 2,51,642, and Kalimpong urban area is approximately 1,90,979.¹

Both districts fall under the authority of the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration, formed in 2012 as a semi-autonomous council within West Bengal to manage development projects, education and tourism, among other departments.

The region has been characterised by political instability, disruption and periodic violence since the 1980s, stemming in part from the movement for autonomy in the hill districts.² However, the region has persevered, with tourism, especially in the Darjeeling hills, and tea, constant in the domestic and global imagination of the hills and the basis of the local economy. Despite this level of recognition, the Darjeeling-Kalimpong hills face a number of challenges: economic, social, and environmental.

Economy: The Darjeeling-Kalimpong hills have high levels of income inequality, poverty, underemployment, and unemployment.³ The most recent statistics for the region demonstrate continual poverty and underemployment⁴ though these do not show variations in income level in different parts of the region, especially rural areas and former tea estates – where many of the respondents in this study originate.

¹ Population figures are complicated by the dated 2011 census and different definitions of which areas fall under the respective urban agglomerations. For instance, Darjeeling Municipality also has jurisdiction over several rural administrative units known as Community Development Blocks. Figures listed above are likely to be underestimated.

² See Middleton, Townsend and Sheniderman, Sara (eds.). *Darjeeling Reconsidered: Histories, Politics, Environment*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2018; Subba, Tanka Bahadur. *Ethnicity, State and Development: a case-study of the Gorkhaland movement in Darjeeling*. Vikas Publishing House: New Delhi, 1992.

³ The India Employment Report 2024 groups West Bengal with 7 other states in Group 1, 'states with a composite score lower than the all-India average' for regional employment. The composite score is based on the following factors: low per capita income; a small share of highly educated youths; prevalence of unemployment among the highly educated population; a small share of regular employment; a large proportion of the population not in employment, education or training; and a degree of informal employment higher than the all-India average. Furthermore, low levels of economic development make it difficult to generate jobs for youth in these states. Presently this data is only composed at state level, West Bengal, and not at district level. See ILO, 2024: 102. International Labour Organisation / Institute for Human Development.

⁴ Chakrabarti, Anjan. "Economic Development in Darjeeling Hills: Quest for Alternatives." *Salesian Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 2, no.1 (2011): 36-46; Golay, Dixchen and Hannan, Abdul. "Labour Market and Livelihood practices in the Closed Tea Gardens of Darjeeling Hills, West Bengal." *International Journal of Rural Management* 21, no. 1 (2025):7-24; Lepcha, Lasang. "Varied aspiration and 'Development': Three Spaces of Kurseong." *Journal of South Asian Development* 18, no.1 (2023): 111-133.

Up-to-date key economic indicators for the Darjeeling and Kalimpong Hill are difficult to obtain. The last West Bengal Human Development Report was published in 2004 and other data is compiled state- wide. However, state-level data from the India Employment Report 2024 offers some insights.⁵

	% population	Survey rank /22
Workforce Participation Rate above 15 years old	47.22	14
Workforce Participation Rate MALE above 15 years old	76.22	5
Workforce Participation Rate FEMALE above 15 years old	17.67	17
Casual workers MALE aged 15+	31.45	21
Casual workers FEMALE aged 15+	23.45	14
Unemployment rate of educated youth (15-29)	20.21	9
Unemployment rate of MALE youths (aged 15–29) with secondary or higher education	19.67	11
Unemployment rate of FEMALE youths (aged 15–29) with secondary or higher education	22.31	8
Youths (aged 15–29) not in employment, education or training	34.40	20

Table. 1 Status of Employment in West Bengal, 2024

The local economy is disproportionately dependent on tea and tourism, resulting in land, labour and resources being leveraged only for these industries.⁶ Even in Kalimpong district, agriculture, which used to be the mainstay economic activity, is being gradually replaced by homestay tourism.⁷ Tea and tourism industries are highly sensitive to external shocks (viz., political agitation, climate change, pandemic, changing taste of consumers), which have an almost immediate impact on people’s lives. While the tourism economy is relatively buoyant for the time being,⁸ the situation is dire in the tea industry, one of the largest employers in the Darjeeling district.

⁵ International Labour Organisation / Institute for Human Development. India Employment Report 2024: Youth employment, education and skills. ILO: New Delhi, 2025. National Multidimensional Poverty Index 2023, NITI Ayog, Government of India, New Delhi.

⁶ Dey, Yashoroo. “Stagnating Between Tea and Tourism: How the Darjeeling Hills may have caught the Dutch Disease.” Social and Policy Research Foundation 2024 <https://sprf.in/stagnating-between-tea-and-tourism-how-the-darjeeling-hills-may-have-caught-the-dutch-disease/>

⁷ Besky, Sarah. “The Country and the City in the Himalayas.” Center for the Advanced Study of India. 2023. <https://casi.sas.upenn.edu/iit/sarahbesky>. Also see, Besky, Sarah and Tamang, Yojak. “Escape to the Country.” Limn 12 (2025).

⁸ India Tourism Data Compendium 2025, Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, https://tourism.gov.in/sites/default/files/2025-09/India%20Tourism%20Data%20Compendium%202025_1.pdf. The Cord, 2025, <https://thecord.in/?p=4478>.

Notorious for low wages, poor workers' benefits and facilities,⁹ the Darjeeling tea sector has been facing numerous tea estate closures, especially since the 2017 Gorkhaland agitation.¹⁰

Spread across 87 tea estates, the Darjeeling tea industry employs approximately 55,000 permanent and 15,000 temporary workers.¹¹ However, as a result of factory closures and declining production, employment opportunities in the tea estates are either diminishing or becoming more uncertain, leading to immense socio-economic precarity for the workers. There are no major land reforms underway, and the slow-moving land distribution process offers workers very little in improvement of their living conditions.¹² Colonial labour regimes, contemporary governance failures and the spatio-political marginality of the region combine to produce intergenerational precarity.¹³

Along with the tea industry, tourism is foundational to the economy of the Darjeeling and Kalimpong hills. However, the tourism sector benefits mostly those already with capital and assets, leading to minimal upward mobility for the majority of those working in the hospitality sector. The tendency to overspecialise or focus only on specific sectors has led to the under-development of non-tourism specific industries and services, and stifled skill diversification.¹⁴ Low wages, seasonal work and minimal opportunities for all skill-development and upward mobility lock workers in financially precarious and unsustainable livelihoods.¹⁵

⁹ The per day rate of tea labourers in 2025 was Rs.250. See Minj, Nolin. "Why workers who grow one of the Darjeeling Hills, West Bengal." *International Journal of Rural Management* 21, no.1 (2024): 7-24; Chhetri, Vivek. "First flush halt forces two gardens' closure; Darjeeling workers stop plucking of tea leaves to press for early settlement of bonus." *Telegraph Online* (2025).

¹⁰ Chhetri, Vivek. "First flush halt forces two gardens' closure; Darjeeling workers stop plucking of tea leaves to press for early settlement of bonus." *Telegraph Online* (2025); Golay, Dixchen and Hannan, Abdul. "Labour Market and Livelihood Practices in the Closed Tea Gardens of Darjeeling Hills, West Bengal." *International Journal of Rural Management* 21, no.1 (2024): 7-24.

¹¹ Accurate figures for the total workforce are unavailable. Estimates have been compiled based on media reports. See Chhetri, Vivek. "Darjeeling tea planters seek tough measures." *The Telegraph Online* 2023 <https://www.telegraphindia.com/west-bengal/darjeeling-tea-planters-look-for-tough-measures/cid/1917460>

¹² Tamang, Sangay Anuvishub and Dukpa, Urgen. "Structural Vulnerabilities in the Darjeeling Hills: The Case for Economic Diversification and Industrial Transition." *Sikkim Express* (2025) https://www.sikkimexpress.com/news-details/structural-vulnerabilities-in-the-darjeeling-hills-the-case-for-economic-diversification-and-industrial-transition#google_vignette

¹³ Majumder, Suranjan. "'Backward Geographies': Contested lives and livelihoods in the tea plantation enclaves of South Asia." *Area* (2025) DOI: 10.1111/area.70026

¹⁴ Dey, Yashorooop. "Stagnating Between Tea and Tourism: How the Darjeeling Hills may have caught the Dutch Disease." *Social and Policy Research Foundation* (2024) <https://sprf.in/stagnating-between-tea-and-tourism-how-the-darjeeling-hills-may-have-caught-the-dutch-disease/>

¹⁵ Nagarale, Virendra, Telang, Piyush and Ghimireh, Shweta. "An Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Sustainable Tourism Practices in Darjeeling District (West Bengal): A Focus on Hotels and Tourist Vehicles." In: Anand, S., Nagarale, V., Abhay, R.K. (eds) *Emerging Geosustainability Transformations in India: Advances in Geographical and Environmental Sciences*. Springer, Singapore; Pradhan, Shailendra Mani. "An Emerging and Novel Approach towards Pro-Poor Tourism: A Study of Homestays in Sittong, Darjeeling, India." *Frontiers in Sustainable Tourism* 3(2024) <https://doi.org/10.3389/frsut.2024.138476>

Social: Ethnic identity politics have a major impact on social life in the Darjeeling Hills. The demands for a separate state of Gorkhaland within the Indian Union have been the single most important political influence on the history and trajectory of development in the Darjeeling and Kalimpong hills. This long-standing demand for a separate state has led to three separate political agitations in 1986, 2007 and 2017. These agitations ended with the formation of administrative councils, which were specific only to the hill districts and were empowered with certain administrative, financial, and executive powers related to the infrastructure, education, cultural development, etc. of the region.¹⁶

Unfulfilled political demands, stagnant development, and increasing unemployment have led to the feeling among hill communities of being marginalised, spatially and socially, in their own territories.¹⁷ Regional ethnic politics has also been instrumental in channeling unemployed, disenfranchised youth as 'rowdies' or foot-soldiers for political parties.¹⁸

Rural-urban migration has been a major social change in the region, with aspirations for a middle-class life, educational opportunities, and work outside agriculture and tea gardens driving urban growth.¹⁹ Urban life is challenging. Inadequate urban infrastructure, housing shortages, and limited employment opportunities outside the tourism sector make for difficult circumstances for new arrivals and those with limited resources. Unemployment is often considered a driver of alcoholism and drug use, particularly among the youth, and mental health issues are a growing cause for concern, as identified by several non-governmental organisations in the region.²⁰

¹⁶Chettri, Mona. "Choosing the Gorkha: at the crossroads of class and ethnicity in the Darjeeling Hills." *Asian Ethnicity* 14, no.3 (2013): 293-308; Subba, Tanka Bahadur. *Ethnicity, State and Development: A Case Study of the Gorkhaland Movement in Darjeeling* (Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi, 1992).

¹⁷Besky refers to Darjeeling as a 'shadow place', 'sites of extraction, invisible to centers of political and economic power yet essential to the global circulation of capital'. See Besky, Sarah. "The land in Gorkhaland: On the edges of belonging in Darjeeling, India." *Environmental Humanities* 9, no. 1 (2017): 18-39.

¹⁸Chettri, Mona. "The rowdies of Darjeeling: politics and underdevelopment in the hills." In Middleton, Townsend and Sheniderman, Sara (eds.). *Darjeeling Reconsidered: Histories, Politics, Environment* (Oxford University Press, New Delhi 2018: 135-153).

¹⁹Brown et al. note that tensions between rural and urban communities are also a factor. They write, 'Longer- term urban residents often blame rural migrants for the declining quality of life in the town'. See Brown, Trent, Ruchira Ganguly-Scrase, and Timothy J. Scrase. "Urbanization, rural mobility, and new class relations in Darjeeling, India." *Critical Asian Studies* 48, no. 2 (2016): 235-256.

²⁰Rai, Kalyani. "The silent crisis: understanding Darjeeling's narcotic epidemic. Sikkim Project (2024) <https://sikkimproject.org/the-silent-crisis-understanding-darjeelings-narcotic-epidemic/>

Outmigration from the region to metropolitan cities in India for education and employment has a long history.²¹ Migrant labour is gendered, with many men leaving to join the army or work in security and many women leaving to work in nursing or the hospitality sectors. In recent decades, this has been matched by migration out of India, predominantly by young people, to work in the Gulf States, Israel, and to a lesser extent, the United Kingdom.²²

Fears of 'brain drain' from the region are constant and well-founded. Out migration is not necessarily a net negative, given the lack of employment opportunities in the hills, the sense of unfulfilled aspirations for those remaining behind, and the need for remittances for families. However, young people don't always undertake migration with knowledge of the risks and pitfalls. Stories of migrant success, whether directly, passed through family and friends or shared through social media, often ignore the downsides, particularly as migrants do not want to appear to have failed or to have made bad decisions.²³

Environmental: The Darjeeling-Kalimpong Hills are vulnerable to multiple environmental challenges impacting livelihoods, housing, mobility and quality of life in the region.²⁴ Forestry has a long history in the region, dating back to the colonial era. In recent decades, deforestation has accelerated further, destabilising land, exacerbating water retention, and increasing the effects of heat and erratic climate events.²⁵ Hydropower projects in the Teesta river belt have wreaked havoc on riverside settlements, livelihoods, and infrastructure, particularly the vital road arteries linking the hill districts to the rest of India.²⁶

The economic and employment futures of young people in the hills are also inseparable from the ecological systems. Climate change, water insecurity, landslides, changing agricultural conditions and pressures on the region's natural resources are reshaping the economic landscape in which young people make decisions about education, work and migration. While this study does not examine these dynamics in depth, they represent an important area for future research and action.

²¹Sharma, Gopal. "Socio-Economic condition of the people of Darjeeling: Out-migration as a survival strategy (?)." *International Journal of Innovative Research and Development* 3, no. 5(2014): 6-18.

²²Ganguly, Rahul. "Migrant aspirations, migrating dreams: belonging, materiality, and migration in urban Darjeeling." *Asian Ethnicity* (2025): 1-16; Pradhan, Nirvan. "In Search of a New Muglan: Culture of Migration in the Eastern Himalayas." *HIMALAYA* 41, no. 1 (2022): 25-39; Rai, Ashlesha. "Women's migration in Darjeeling (India) and Jhapa (Nepal) Districts: A Sociological Study. Sikkim University PhD Thesis (2021).

²³Chakraborty, Anup Shekhar. "'Moving Out' and the social imaginaries at play: Construing the trends in Migrations in Darjeeling Hills & Plains (2005–2015)." *Refugee Watch: A South Asian Journal on Forced Migration* 51 (2018): 30-61.

²⁴Shah, Rinan. 'Urbanisation, Extreme Rainfall, and Disaster Risk in the Himalaya'. Shiv Nadar University, November 4, 2025. <https://snu.edu.in/centres/centre-of-excellence-for-himalayan-studies/research/urbanisation-extreme-rainfall-and-disaster-risk-in-the-himalaya/>

²⁵For a detailed account see Das, Gautam Kumar. *Forests and forestry of West Bengal: Survey and Analysis*. Springer Nature, 2021; Reading Himalaya." *Forest [Conservation] Amendment Act, 2023*. Policy Analysis Series <https://www.readinghimalaya.com/policy-analysis-series/>

²⁶Shah, Rinan. "Quiet Struggles of Communities Navigating Hydropower in the Himalayan Region | Centre of Excellence for Himalayan Studies." Shiv Nadar University, November 14, 2025.

While hydropower dams remain central to the development strategy of the West Bengal Government, they bring unpredictability and precarity to the region through irreversible damage to waterways, fish stocks, and the stability of the hills themselves.²⁷

Landslides are a constant problem throughout the hills, exacerbated by the rapid development of urban areas, tunnelling and other invasive engineering practices from the hydropower industry, and the impacts of deforestation on soil stability.²⁸ As recently as October 2025, heavy rain caused devastating landslides in Mirik and Sukhiapokhri in the Darjeeling Hills, cutting off road routes for days, displacing residents, and leading to the death of over 20 people.

Urban development has accelerated in both Darjeeling and Kalimpong,²⁹ and also in smaller towns such as Kurseong, Gorubathan, and Lava. Given the steep hill topography and land regimes in place, urban expansion has been characterised by vertical growth to meet the demand for housing and for commercial floor space, including for hotels. Urban migration from surrounding villages, Nepal, and from the plains areas has stressed the housing market, especially with so much floor space dedicated to hotels. As a result, slum settlements are a feature of both Darjeeling and Kalimpong.³⁰

Rapidly expanding urban areas experience severe water shortages, waste management problems—including both solid waste and human/animal waste, and an increase in landslides and other climate-related disasters.³¹ Agricultural land is similarly impacted by water shortages and erratic weather, including severe weather events such as the 2023 Glacial Lake Outburst Flood (GLOF). The legacy of the tea industry has impacted the quality of agricultural land in parts of the region, as have one-time boom crops like cardamom and cinchona.

²⁷ McGowran refers to the hydropower industry as 'disasters-in-the-making' in the Kalimpong Hills. See McGowran, Peter. "Geopolitical assemblages and disasters-in-the-making in Kalimpong, India." *Political Geography* 108 (2024): 103008; Fernandes, Walter et al. *The Teesta on the Run: Development-Induced Displacement in Sikkim 1975-2010*. (North Eastern Social Research Centre, Guwahati and Salesian College Research Centre, Guwahati 2016).

²⁸ Mondal, Subrata, and Sujit Mandal. "Landslide susceptibility mapping of Darjeeling Himalaya, India using index of entropy (IOE) model." *Applied Geomatics* 11, no. 2 (2019): 129-146.

²⁹ The 2011 Census provides dated urban population statistics for the region. Recent research using satellite and other imagery to better capture urban growth in the region suggests the size of the urban agglomeration in both Darjeeling and Kalimpong has outgrown past predictions. On Darjeeling see Chhetri, Bishal. "Assessing the urban sustainability of the slum settlements in the hill resorts of India: A case study of Darjeeling town." *GeoJournal* 88, no. 2 (2023): 1807-1828; Roy, Subham, Suranjan Majumder, Arghadeep Bose, and Indrajit Roy Chowdhury. "Hilly terrain and housing wellness: Geo-visualizing spatial dynamics of urban household quality in the Himalayan town of Darjeeling, India." *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 45, no. 2 (2024): 361-383. On Kalimpong see Hembram, Buddhadev, and N. C. Jana. "Analyzing Urban Extension and Land Use Changes in Kalimpong Municipality, West Bengal Using Remote Sensing and GIS." In *Smart Cities for Sustainable Development*, pp. 335-348 (Springer Nature Singapore, Singapore, 2022).

³⁰ Chhetri, Bishal. "Proliferation of Slums in Kalimpong Town of Darjeeling Himalaya: A Study of Socio-Economic and Housing Conditions." *Ensemble* 2, no.1 (2020): 52-68.

³¹ Ganguly, Rahul. "Living with Risk: High-rise Construction, Precarity and Urban Futures in Darjeeling and Kalimpong." *Society and Culture in South Asia* (2025): 23938617251380007.

Furthermore, with many tea estates closing down in recent decades, there is insufficient land and demand for labour to provide livelihoods for former tea estate workers, many of whom have been working and living in tea estates for generations.³²

Education landscape: Darjeeling and Kalimpong occupy an important position in the landscape of higher education. Historically, these regions developed as important centres for learning, attracting students from the plains of north Bengal, neighbouring Indian states, and bordering countries such as Nepal and Bhutan.

Table 2 below presents a picture of the education and employment landscape nationally and regionally. District-level data for the Darjeeling and Kalimpong hills were unavailable; however, data from Sikkim offers an interesting perspective for regional comparison.

	India	West Bengal	Sikkim
Higher Education Enrolment in India 2021-22 (Gross Enrolment Ratio)	32.5%	29.5%	32.8%
Gender Parity in Higher Education	1.01	1.03	1.21
Labour Force Participation Rate ³³ (individuals aged 15-59 are either employed or actively seeking employment)	60.5%	61.1%	77.6%
In-migration 2001- 2011 (Census 2011)	4,14,22,917	16,56,952	46,554
Out-migration 2001-2011 as % of population (Census 2011) ³⁴	17.1	11.1	17.6
Out-migration for employment 2001-2011 as % of population (Census 2011) ³⁵	5.0	3.8	3.1

Table 2. Education and Employment Comparison: National and Regional

Darjeeling has one of the oldest colleges in eastern India, St. Joseph's College (1927), followed by Salesian College (1933), one of the early missionary-led initiatives that brought degree education to the region. Darjeeling Government College was established in 1948, marking a significant post- independence public investment and is one of the largest government colleges in the area.

³² Golay, Dixchen, and Abdul Hannan. "Labour Market and Livelihood Practices in the Closed Tea Gardens of Darjeeling Hills, West Bengal." *International Journal of Rural Management* 21, no. 1 (2025): 7-24.

³³ Periodic Labour Force Survey 2025, Government of India.

³⁴ Census data as represented in Paul, Kalosona, Abinash Bauri, Jibanbandhu Gayak, Khalid Raja Khan, Sathi Mandal, Arup Sen, and Uttam Kumar Patra. "Internal Migration In India: Evidence From Census Data." *Migration Letters* 19, no.2 (2022): 1585-1609.

³⁵ Ibid.

Kurseong College was established in 1967, which extended higher education beyond the main Darjeeling Town into the surrounding hill subdivisions.

Colleges in Kalimpong were established to expand access to higher education in the region. Kalimpong College was established in 1962 and remains one of the oldest general degree colleges in the district, followed by Cluny Women's College (1998). Several colleges were established in the mid-1990s onwards to serve rural and peripheral areas, such as Bijanbari Degree College (1995), Mirik College (2000) and Ghoom-Jorebunglow Degree College (2004). More recently, government degree colleges have been established in Pedong and Gorubathan in 2015 to reduce geographical and financial barriers for students unable to access colleges in Kalimpong Town.

The educational ecosystem has undergone a significant transformation in recent decades, characterised by unevenness in access, institutional quality, and enrolment and retention rates. Prolonged political unrest has affected students, many of whom chose to study outside the region rather than endure disruptions. Political tension has affected student motivation, aspirations and encouraged out-migration of both students and teachers alike, many of whom are moving out of the region for better pay and opportunities.

This has led to a shortage of qualified teaching staff, leaving many colleges in the region in a fragile state.³⁶

Participation and persistence in education are significantly influenced by socio-economic background and accessibility. Long travel distances, poor transportation infrastructure, and unequal institutional distribution severely limit access to higher education and increase absenteeism and dropout rates.³⁷ According to research from the Darjeeling hills, students from rural and tea garden households experience additional disadvantages due to limited parental education, first-generation learner status, and unstable income.³⁸ A shortage of dormitory amenities and subsidised hostel accommodation creates difficulties for students from distant places. For instance, hostel facilities are not available in Sonada Degree College, Mirik College, Bijanbari Degree College, Government General Degree College in Pedong, and Gorubathan. Furthermore, the colleges considered to be of higher quality are based in Darjeeling town and, to a lesser extent, Kalimpong, which are expensive places to live for students without relatives or other connections.

Against this context, young people from the hills pursue education as a means of mobility, intergenerational uplift, and as a pathway to employment.

³⁶ Raj, Amar Singh. "State of Higher Education in the Hills". Web Journal of Social Sciences, 7, no. 2 (2015):45-62. For impact on school education, see Mukhia, Prerna and Dvivedi, Sweta. "Impact of Agitation of Gorkhas of Darjeeling in 2017 on School Education: Perception of Students of Darjeeling District." Aalochan Drishti, 5, no.20 (2021): 2455-4219.

³⁷ Subba, Jamuna and Narbu, Sherpa. "Constraints of Higher Education in Darjeeling Hills: A Critical Analysis." International Journal of Applied Social Science, 5 no. 12 (2018): 2552-2560.

³⁸ Chettri, Arpana and Gangal, Meenu. "Inter-Generational Educational Mobility in Selected Tea Gardens of District Darjeeling: A Socioeconomic Perspective." International Journal of Social Science and Human Research 8, no.10 (2025): 8048-8059; Lama, Marsha. "An Evaluation of the Post Matric Scholarship Scheme provided to the tribal students of Darjeeling Municipality." International Journal of Advanced Scientific Research and Management 4, no. 4 (2019): 155-161.

4. Site Selection

Categorising Study Sites

A number of factors influence the educational development of students residing in the hills, including distance, mobility, affordability, the reputation of institutions, and the socio-economic background of students.

For analytical clarity, 14 colleges were initially identified, of which 12 colleges participated in the survey. Ghoom-Jorebunglow Degree College and Swatantrata Senani Gaga Tshering Dukpa College (Sukhia Pokhari Degree College) could not be included because of access constraints.

Participating colleges were categorised into clusters based on their distance from the main town centre in both Darjeeling and Kalimpong. Distance and travel time were treated as critical variables because they directly influence student mobility, attendance, institutional choice, dropout rates, and overall academic participation.

The sites chosen for this study provide complex and rich insights into the interrelated dynamics of access/inequality/vocation/aspiration within North Bengal's geographically marginalised regions.

Darjeeling District Colleges	Kalimpong District Colleges
(i) St. Joseph's College	(i) Kalimpong Government College
(ii) Southfield College	(ii) Cluny Women's College
(iii) Darjeeling Government College	(iii) Government General Degree College, Pedong
(iv) Ghoom-Jorebunglow Degree College	(iv) Gorubathan Government College
(v) Salesian College, Sonada	
(vi) Sonada Degree College	
(vii) Kurseong College	
(viii) Mirik College	
(ix) Bijanbari Degree College	
(x) Swatantrata Senani Gaga Tshering Dukpa College (Sukhia Pokhari Degree College)	

Table 3: List of Colleges Identified for Inclusion in the Survey

Study Site 1: Darjeeling

Darjeeling has the greatest concentration of colleges in the hills. With some of the oldest government and missionary institutions in North Bengal, it has long been recognized as a prominent educational hub in the hill region. However, interviews indicate that while institutional presence has increased, differences between colleges have grown, especially with regards to infrastructure, faculty availability, student intake, and academic reputation.

Cluster 1: Colleges Located Within Darjeeling Town

Institutions:

- (i) St. Joseph's College
- (ii) Southfield College
- (iii) Darjeeling Government College
- (iv) Ghoom - Jorebunglow Degree College

These colleges are located within the municipal boundary of Darjeeling town and are the most accessible institutions for students residing in urban and peri-urban areas. St. Joseph's College and Southfield College are private minority institutions and enjoy a strong academic reputation in the region. They are often perceived as elite colleges due to better infrastructure, English-medium instruction, and relatively consistent academic performance.

Darjeeling Government College is the only fully government-run college in the town and serves a large population of first-generation learners and students from economically weaker backgrounds. The relatively low fee structure makes it one of the most affordable options, resulting in high enrolment. Ghoom - Jorebunglow Degree College, although geographically close to the town, has comparatively lower student enrolment.

Interviews and conversations during fieldwork suggest that degree colleges are often perceived as academically inferior by students and parents. One of the faculty members noted that despite being affiliated with University of North Bengal (NBU) in Siliguri, students tend to prefer to enrol in NBU itself due to its perceived institutional prestige and wider exposure.

Overall, Cluster 1 colleges have the highest enrolment in Darjeeling due to their accessibility, reputation, and relatively better academic infrastructure.



Cluster 2: Colleges Located Approximately 40–50 Minutes from Town

Institutions:

- (i) Salesian College, Sonada
- (ii) Sonada Degree College
- (iii) Kurseong College

About 40- 50 minutes from Darjeeling town, these colleges are situated in the hill subdivisions of Sonada and Kurseong. These institutions primarily serve students from nearby communities.

With about 1,500 students, Salesian College, Sonada, has the highest enrolment and is the most well-known minority institution in the area. It has good infrastructure, residential facilities, and extracurricular activities in addition to offering a variety of undergraduate programs. However, its higher fee structure might be a possible barrier for students from low-income backgrounds.

Sonada Degree College students mostly hail from Sonada, Kurseong, and nearby tea estates. According to college officials, the college has seen a consistent drop in admissions since the COVID- 19 pandemic. Enrolment has been greatly impacted by family financial hardship and student migration to urban areas, mainly for work.

In terms of student enrolment, Kurseong College is in the middle, lower than town-based institutions, but not extremely low. The college primarily serves students from Kurseong, such as Ghayabari and Tindharia.

Cluster 3: Colleges Located More Than One Hour from Town

Institutions:

- (i) Mirik College
- (ii) Bijanbari Degree College
- (iii) Swatantrata Senani Gaga Tshering Dukpa College (Sukhia Pokhari Degree College)

Students from rural and tea garden communities are the main target pool for these geographically isolated colleges. Maximum enrolment in these colleges does not exceed 300 students. Absenteeism is highest in this cluster because of long commutes, poor transportation connectivity, and challenging terrain. Many students commute for several hours every day from neighbouring villages, which has an impact on their regular attendance and academic engagement.

These colleges are vital in providing students from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds access to higher education, but they are still limited by inadequate facilities, a lack of faculty, and low institutional visibility.

Study site 2: Kalimpong

Over the last few years, Kalimpong's population has steadily increased due to migration from surrounding villages, urban growth, and increased interest from young adults wishing to further their education.

Cluster 1: Colleges Located Within Kalimpong Town

Institutions:

- (i) Kalimpong Government College
- (ii) Cluny Women's College

Kalimpong town's higher education is based on the two above-mentioned colleges. Together, these colleges have over 400 students.

Kalimpong Government College, as a government-aided institution, serves students from Kalimpong town as well as surrounding rural areas and nearby districts. The rapid increase in the number of students attending Kalimpong College has resulted in an expansion of its facilities.

Cluster 2: College Located Approximately 40 Minutes from Town

Institution:

- (i) Government General Degree College, Pedong

Government General Degree College, Pedong, is situated approximately 40 minutes from Kalimpong town and supports learners residing in Pedong and the surrounding villages. The college offers a wide range of options in the Science departments, helping to draw students from throughout the subdivision.

Students who cannot relocate to Kalimpong town because of financial or social difficulties find Government General Degree College, Pedong, to be a good option for continuing their studies and achieving higher education that is within a reasonable distance from their homes.

Cluster 3: College Located More Than Two Hours from Town

Institution:

(i) Gorubathan Government College

Of all the academic institutions in the project, Gorubathan Government College is by far the most remote, located more than two hours from Kalimpong. The majority of its students are from very rural and forest-edge locations. In terms of enrolment figures, Gorubathan has the lowest of all the colleges surveyed for this research. This college also faces several challenges, such as limited connectivity and difficulties in retaining students. Nevertheless, it remains an important source of education for one of the underdeveloped areas of North Bengal.

To conclude, participating colleges were clustered into an identifiable hierarchy of locations which led to the identification of the following trends:

- Town-centre colleges are attended by a larger proportion of students than those located in remote areas;
- Private or minority-managed colleges in town-centre locations have higher numbers of enrolments, greater levels of infrastructure, and more substantial reputational capital;
- Government degree colleges located in remote areas are attended by some of the poorest student populations and continue to cope with low rates of enrolment, high levels of absenteeism, and little institutional visibility.

5. Methodology

The research uses a mixed methods design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to develop a comprehensive knowledge of the state of the youth across Darjeeling and Kalimpong.

A comprehensive survey method was used to generate numerical data on key indicators related to the socio-economic conditions, aspirations, and challenges faced by the youth. This was complemented by semi-structured interviews to understand and explore the lived experiences, perceptions, and contextual factors that often cannot be fully captured through surveys alone, as there might be issues that are contextually isolated. While the survey provided quantifiable evidence and indicative trends across participating colleges, semi-structured interviews offered a nuanced insight into personal experiences and realities that may not emerge through numerical data alone. These findings were substantiated with secondary data. By combining these three approaches, the study triangulates findings to enhance the depth and nuance of the results.

Survey

The youth survey was conducted in 12 colleges across Darjeeling and Kalimpong districts. Repeated entries due to intermittent internet access at some study sites led to duplicates; 839 survey entries were used for the final analysis. Stratified quota sampling was employed to ensure adequate representation from gender groups, academic programs and years of study. This was consistent with the overall purpose of this project, which was to generate data that reflects different types of experiences among students.

Sampling design was based on key socio-demographic and academic variables, such as ethnic and caste category (Scheduled Tribe, Scheduled Caste, Other Backward Classes, and General Category), gender, first and non-first-generation learners, academic stream (Science, Commerce and Arts), year of the study (first to third year), age group, and location.

There was no upper or lower age limit set or imposed for the participant selection, given that the respondents were currently enrolled students at the respective colleges when the data was being collected.



Owing to the range in student numbers across colleges³⁹ (from 200 to more than 1500 students), single survey target number was considered to be challenging in terms of over-representation of students from smaller colleges, data saturation in institutions with limited enrolment and distorted comparisons across institutions.

To address these concerns, the sampling strategy was revised as follows:

- colleges with more than 1,500 students: target of 100 surveys
- colleges with fewer than 500 students: target of approximately 10% student representation

This proportional approach ensured methodological rigour, balanced representation and presents reliable comparative insights.⁴⁰

Names of Colleges	No. of Students	No. of Surveys
St. Joseph's College	2500	99
Darjeeling Government College	2500	99
Salesian College, Sonada	2000	94
Kalimpong Government College	1200	98
Southfield College	800	106
Government General Degree College, Pedong	500	89
Cluny Women's College	400	39
Kurseong College	400	37
Gorubathan Government College	350	32
Bijanbari Degree College	300	55
Mirik College	250	46
Sonada Degree College	147	45

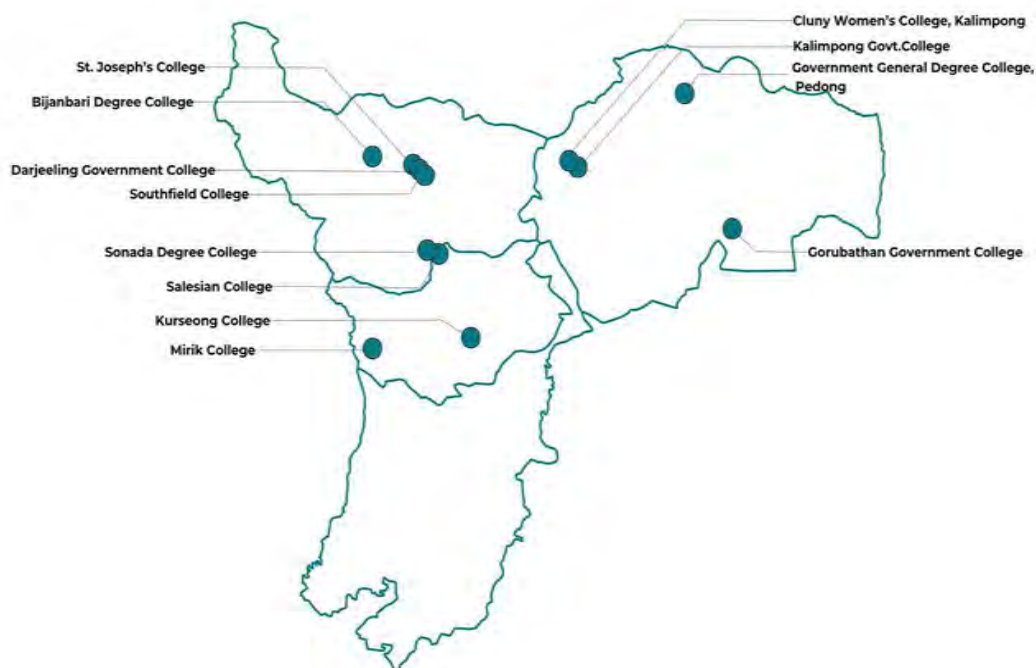
Table 4. List of Colleges Surveyed

³⁹ Data on total student strength in each college was collected from information available on college websites and/or details provided by college representatives.

⁴⁰ Colleges where surveys could not be conducted:

a. Ghoom Degree College

b. Swatantrata Senani Gaga Tshering Dukpa College (Sukhiapokhari Degree College)



Map 1. Colleges Surveyed (Edited, Source - EHF)

The surveys were collected by volunteers based in different colleges and post-graduates from Darjeeling and Kalimpong. To operationalize the study, Reading Himalaya conducted three structured training sessions for the volunteers. The training sessions are aimed at ensuring ethical, consistent, and informed data collection. Volunteers from Darjeeling were also provided with in-person training on survey implementation.

The aims of the training sessions were to:

- prepare volunteers for field-based research activities;
- build a clear understanding among the volunteers with regard to the survey;
- enable volunteers to be able to communicate research objectives to the participants;
- introduce the volunteers to research concepts such as consent, ethics, confidentiality, and data reliability.

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews combine structure and flexibility for both the researcher and the respondent. The interviews cover relevant themes, allow for changes or the introduction of new questions, whilst giving respondents flexibility in their response.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted amongst undergraduate youth, graduates, non- governmental organizations, teachers, and education professionals to understand the aspirations, challenges, barriers and support systems for young adults in the region.



Interviews were structured across four stakeholder categories to identify trends, challenges, and spaces for intervention. Participants were selected using purposive and convenience sampling across different socio-economic backgrounds, genders, and educational or occupational categories. Separate interview guides were developed for each category to ensure relevance and consistency.

Interviews were conducted across the following categories:

- Government officials (education and allied departments);
- Civil society organisations actively engaged in education and youth development;
- Educational institutions (principals, headmasters, and professors);
- Undergraduate students (current, former and drop-outs).

Data collection focused on six major themes across different sectors

Demographic Profile • Caste/Ethnicity • Location • Marital Status • Age, Gender • Education Level	Education & Skills • School/College • Enrolment status • Drop-out rates • Access to vocational training • Digital literacy and internet access	Migration & Mobility • Internal or cross-border migration experience
Economic Status • Employment status • Type of employment • Income level	Mental Health & Wellbeing • Access to mental health support • Access to recreation or sports facilities	Civic Engagement • Participation in community/youth organisations • Political awareness or participation • Trust in local institutions (government, police, schools)

Ethics

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles for social research. Participation in the research was entirely voluntary, and all respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, the nature of their participation, and their right to decline to answer any question or withdraw at any stage without consequence.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. No personal identifiers were collected, and all data were anonymised to protect the privacy and confidentiality of respondents. Interview transcripts and survey data were securely stored and accessed only by the research team.

Limitations

Limited availability and granularity of data

Availability and accessibility of district-level statistical data on regional economy, labour profile, scholarships etc., either do not exist, are not updated or are not publicly available. These secondary data gaps limit our understanding of the scale and nature of the socio- economic contexts of youth precarity.

Time lag in official statistics

There is also a time lag in the officially published data, such as All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), National Scholarship Portal (NSP) dashboard and state reports, most of them being updated till 2021. While efforts have been made to collate data from multiple sources, the unavailability of official data post 2021 may have a minor effect on overall data collection on recent enrolment patterns, scheme coverage, and post-pandemic shifts.

Uneven institutional record-keeping

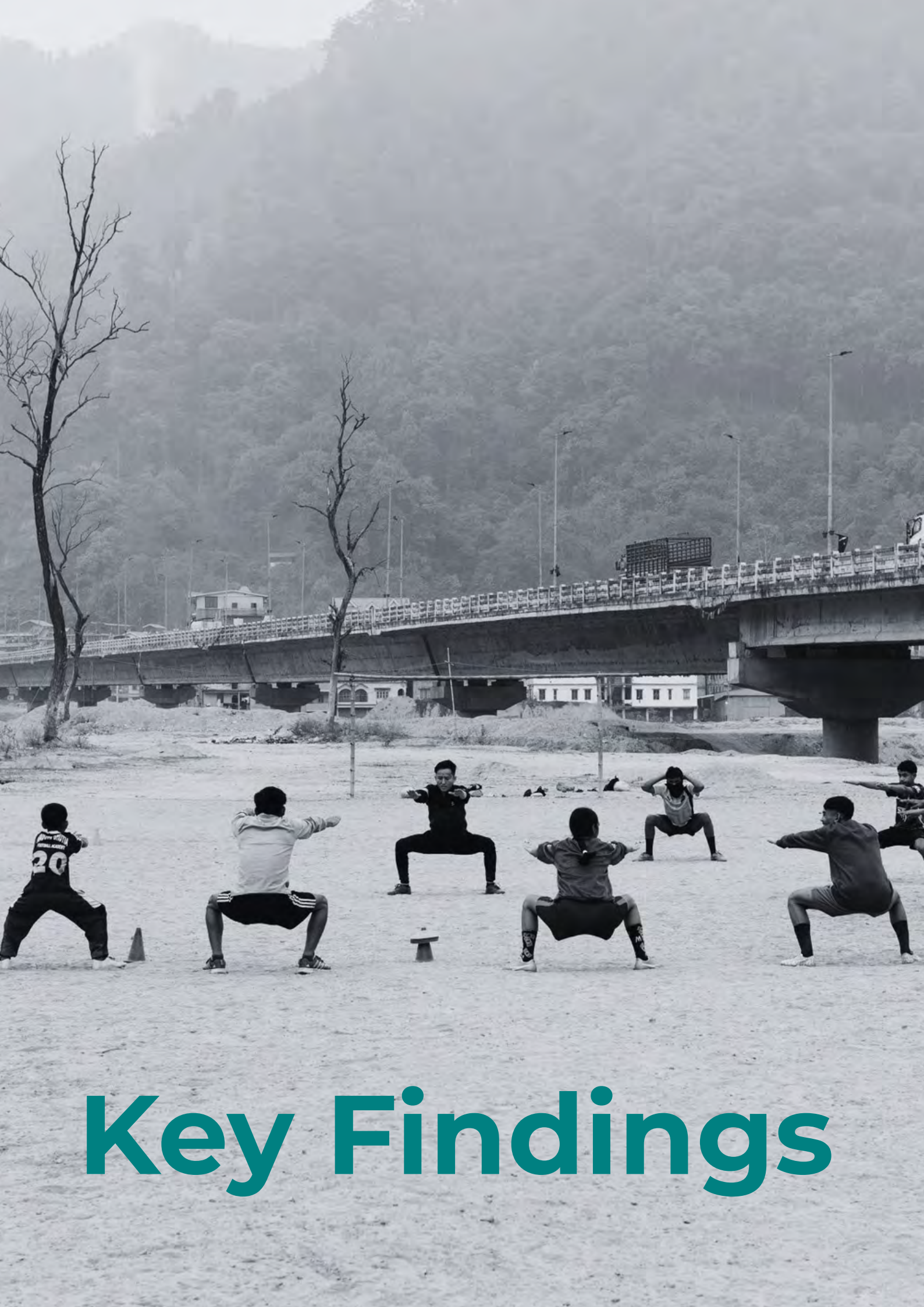
Colleges in the hills vary in their capacity to maintain, digitise, and update records. In some cases, institutional data on student demographics, scholarship beneficiaries, applicants and dropouts were incomplete or not available. In such circumstances, data has been collected through information available online, or through primary interviews.

Limited coverage of private and non-formal institutions

This research focused on fully government and government-funded degree colleges or semi- government colleges. Students who were enrolled in private institutions, vocational centres, distance education or informal training programmes were not part of the study. A wider coverage including private and non-formal institutions, would provide a more cohesive understanding of the education to employment pathways.

Access for interviews and survey

Interviews with government personnel working in the Education Department could not be conducted on the grounds of administrative protocol which prevented them from discussing official matters with the general public. Hence, district-level procedural understanding of scholarship schemes has been collated based on secondary data available online. Survey collection was also affected by barriers to access students; in some colleges, despite sustained efforts, administrative heads did not allow the students to participate in the survey, as they either did not see the value in the project, or had internal internships already underway.



Key Findings

Aspirations are structurally conditioned

Student aspirations are largely shaped by the social, economic and cultural environment within which they are located. Structural inequalities, institutional cultures, family circumstances, role models and gender norms define what may be considered accessible and achievable by students.

Widespread uncertainty about career trajectories

Nearly one-third of the students reported having no clarity about either short-term or long-term career goals; students do not gain greater career clarity as they progress through college. Student aspirations focus more on employment than careers.

Compounding effect of social and institutional barriers, creating a sliding scale of vulnerability

Nearly 40% of students reported multiple, overlapping challenges, including a lack of mental health support, career guidance, and academic and technological support. Students from rural areas also reported the impact of infrastructural connectivity on motivation, attendance and ability to continue higher education.

Economic vulnerability is the biggest challenge faced by students

Financial stress was a major factor in student aspirations and career outcomes. The average annual income of most students' families was less than Rs. 1 lakh. Many students were also facing multi-generational unemployment, especially with the closure of tea estates.

First-generation learners dominate enrolment

Over 70% of the students surveyed are first-generation learners. First-generation learners are also the most economically vulnerable, highly uncertain about their futures, lack institutional support, mentoring and knowledge of emerging or alternative employment pathways.

Disconnect between higher education and labour market opportunities

Employment opportunities available in the Darjeeling and Kalimpong hills are misaligned with the educational qualifications and aspirations of students. Employment opportunities are concentrated in tourism, and agricultural sectors; development of employment opportunities that are aligned with student aspirations is highly challenging.

Traditional career choices dominate

Student career preferences remain concentrated in a traditional set of occupations – teaching, nursing, and civil services, which reflects restricted exposure to alternative career pathways. Students also reported an overwhelming preference for government employment. However, structural barriers, viz., lack of information and guidance, language requirements, competitive exam coaching, financial constraints, etc., impede student aspirations for government employment.

Early exit from higher education as a calculated risk

Many young adults are choosing to pursue low-investment, short-term employment, especially in the informal sector, rather than invest 3-4 years in education, which does not provide employment guarantees. Early exits are also driven by structural and institutional barriers, rather than informed choice.

Out-migration has emerged as a default coping strategy

Out-migration for employment has emerged as a dominant option and aspiration among the youth surveyed. While many educators noted this ‘brain-drain’ to be a worrying trend, others thought of this as an inevitable outcome given the lack of political will and ineffective policy implementation to address youth unemployment.

Perceptions of caste/ethnicity-based inequities and political patronage impact student motivation and aspirations

Almost 40% of students felt that political connections were vital for accessing employment and educational opportunities. Combined with perceived inequities embedded in the reservation system, many students experienced demotivation, disengagement and lower participation in competitive examinations.

Uneven institutional support

Administrative support and student guidance varied according to the institution’s funding and human resource capacity, with private and/urban colleges offering more support than rural colleges. This unevenness further exacerbates the disadvantages being experienced by an already vulnerable group, especially in the context of scholarships and career guidance, leading to high exclusion rates.

Limited outreach of government scholarships and schemes

Only 25% of the students surveyed accessed scholarships and stipends despite the majority meeting eligibility criteria. Majority students did not have any awareness of available programs, which highlights significant awareness and outreach gaps.

Limited access to affordable and well-integrated vocational courses

Only 7 % of the students surveyed were engaged in vocational courses. These courses were self-funded and were primarily being pursued to develop practical skills, rather than as directly complementary to their undergraduate degrees.





Findings & Analysis

7. Findings & Analysis

Youth & Education in the Darjeeling and Kalimpong Hills: A Generation on the Edge of Precarity

Data from the survey and interviews reveal a complex, and at times contradictory education landscape in the Darjeeling and Kalimpong hills. Students continue to enrol in higher education in large numbers and view education as a potential pathway to transforming their lives. However, their aspirations or visions for their futures are not completely, nor consistently supported by existing institutional capacities, infrastructure and socio-economic realities of the region.

This section is based on data from interviews and surveys, and presents emerging trends on youth aspirations, mobility, and barriers that undergraduate students of the Darjeeling and Kalimpong hills are currently facing. The section is divided into two main discussion topics, presenting detailed data and analysis on each topic.

7.1. Aspirations, Uncertain Pathways and Unequal Starting Points

- 7.1.1. First Generation Learners and Unequal Aspirational
- 7.1.2. Capacity Compounded Inequities in Youth Transitions:
- 7.1.3. Institutional Constraints & Access Gaps
- 7.1.4. College Drop-out Case Study

7.2. The Education to Employment Disconnect

- 7.2.1. Out-migration for employment



7.1 Aspirations, Uncertain Pathways and Unequal Starting Points

“About careers in Darjeeling, I think for boys it is the army, and for girls, nursing, we are only aware of that profession, okay. We are not aware of other any other opportunities. I’m also not aware because we don’t know about the admission procedures. I wanted to opt for forensic science, but for forensic science, we need maths. I don’t have maths, and I don’t think I can get it.”

Reshma, Darjeeling⁴¹

Findings from the survey indicate significant uncertainty around career goals and aspirations. Almost **one in three students (27%) reported having no clarity** about their immediate as well as long-term goals. **More girls than boys reported being unclear about their futures.** This uncertainty does not clear up as students’ progress in their education. Among the 226 students who were unsure about their careers, 35% were in their first year, 34.5% in their second year and 30% in their third year. This suggests that time spent in college does not always lead to incremental clarity over careers and goals, a trend which was also noted in the first State of the Youth Report 2022.

72% of the total surveyed students were the first in their families to attend college, and while they faced a combination of challenges (family responsibilities, mental health, distance/transport, etc.), they were most affected by financial difficulties, as the majority belonged to low-median income groups.

70% of students from this group also did not receive any extra support from their educational institutions, and 64% wanted to migrate out of Darjeeling after their education.

Therefore, a combination of factors can perhaps be attributed to this lack of clarity about their future, and also probably informs their choice to out-migrate. Similarly, in terms of professional aspirations, a narrow and traditional framework continued to dominate. Teaching, the army, nursing, and civil services still ranked high in student preferences, highlighting the stagnancy in terms of information and/or access to alternative career choices that might be available.

For many students, their undergraduate degrees and honours subjects did not align with their chosen career paths.

⁴¹Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of all the respondents.

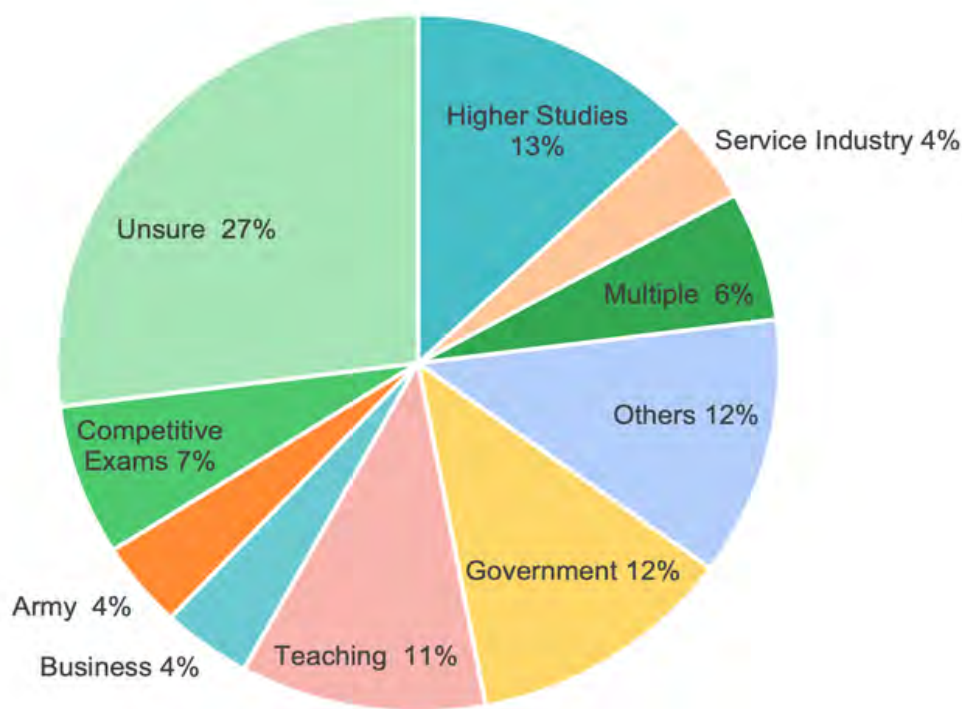


Fig. 1 Distribution of Career Choices by Sector Across Genders

As more students graduate with similar degrees, the pressure to find employment in their areas of study becomes increasingly more difficult. These preferences were also strongly gendered: **87.5% of female respondents selected teaching** as a preferred profession, while male respondents' choices were evenly distributed across categories. Interestingly, 12% of students chose the 'Others' category, showing that their aspirations may not align completely with the conventional employment categories, and point to diverse, if not neatly articulated career goals.

Sectoral preferences further highlight the role of cultural and socio-economic factors in shaping aspirations and career choices. As in many parts of India, in the Darjeeling and Kalimpong hills too, employment in the government sector is considered safe, stable and respectable. **77% of student respondents wanted to work in the government sector solely**,⁴² while only 6% wanted to work in the private sector. This is in sharp contrast to the lived reality, as service roles in tourism and ancillary industries are the largest youth employers in the region.⁴³

⁴²These preferences show us the realities of the labour market and have also been documented in the Periodic Labour Force Study Annual Report (2022-23), which reported high unemployment rates among youth, especially with secondary or higher education, and a widespread engagement in informal or casual employment. The report also found that youth in India have a preference for a narrow range of occupations, but at the same time lack awareness of the skills, qualifications, and pathways required to achieve these goals.

⁴³Tea plantations and tourism are among the region's major sources of employment. See Rai, Binita. "Natural Endowment and Tourism in the Hills: A Case Study of Darjeeling." *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science* 2020, 4 (no.4): 88-91.

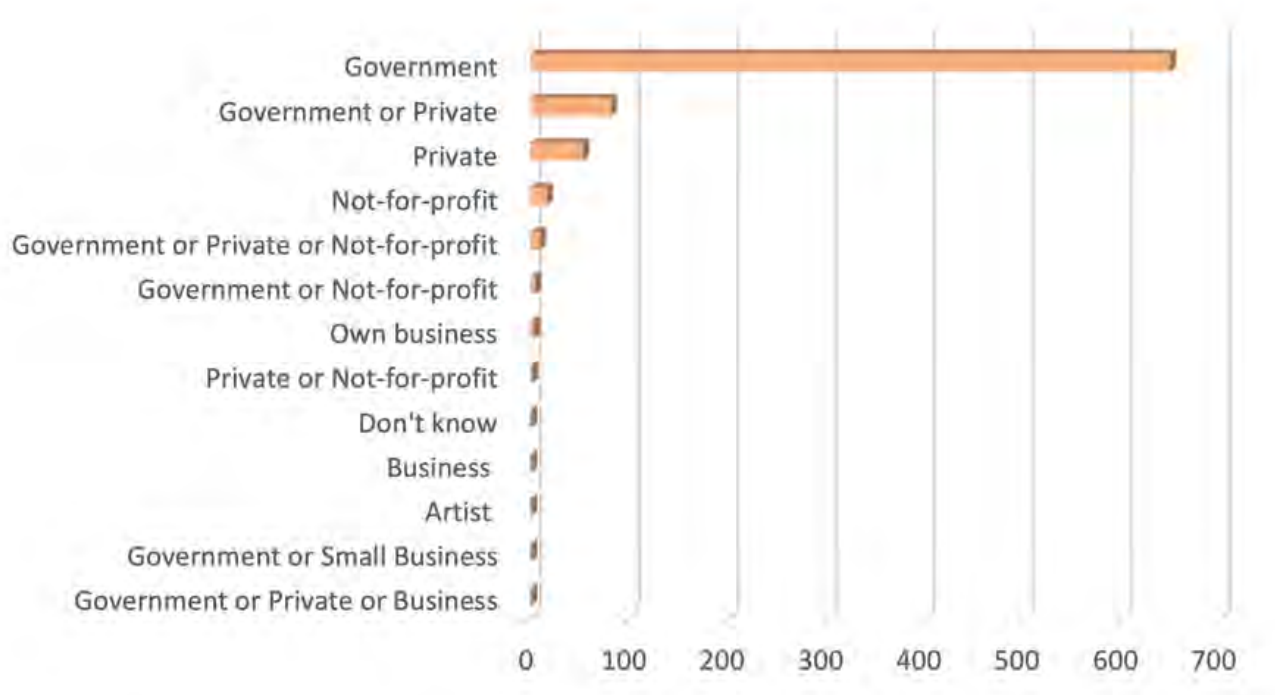


Fig. 2. Distribution of Sectoral Choices

Preference for the government sector was higher amongst female respondents, with 85% wanting to work in this sector; **only 3% of female respondents** wanted to work in the private sector. Government employment remains difficult to pursue for many students, as most do not have access to accurate, timely information about civil service exams, and/or the financial wherewithal to attend coaching classes. While local youth and education-focused organisations like Darjeeling Welfare Society and Edwards Foundation offer coaching classes to a limited number of students, they cannot cater to all the students aspiring to take civil service exams.

7.1.1. First-Generation Learners and Unequal Aspirational Capacity

Uncertainty over aspirations is **more pronounced amongst first-generation learners**. Over 70% of the students surveyed identified themselves as first-generational learners, defined as students whose parents have not completed college or university education. This large cohort of first-generation learners in the colleges surveyed indicates that higher education in the region is being accessed by students from families without prior experience in tertiary education.

The participation of first-generation learners in higher education might also be read as incremental economic mobility among households that are able and willing to invest in college education. However, this cohort of first-generation learners face a distinct set of challenges stemming from a lack of parental guidance or experience in education, limited access to information, disparities in academic preparation, and the absence of role models.

These challenges are not confined to rural areas alone; first-generation learners are distributed across both urban and rural areas.

Their career choices, therefore, represent a constant negotiation between the demands and pressures of their lived realities and aspirations.

“Respondent: Yes, there are some challenges, especially when it comes to paying my semester fees. Since my aunt has to pay for her children as well, and I don't have a source of income, we often rely on other family members, who often help us a lot to pay my fees.

Interviewer: Is there any kind of family pressure as to what you should study, what you should not study in college, or what you should do?

*Respondent: **No, pressure at all. Because they don't know what is happening over here.**”*

Neha, Darjeeling

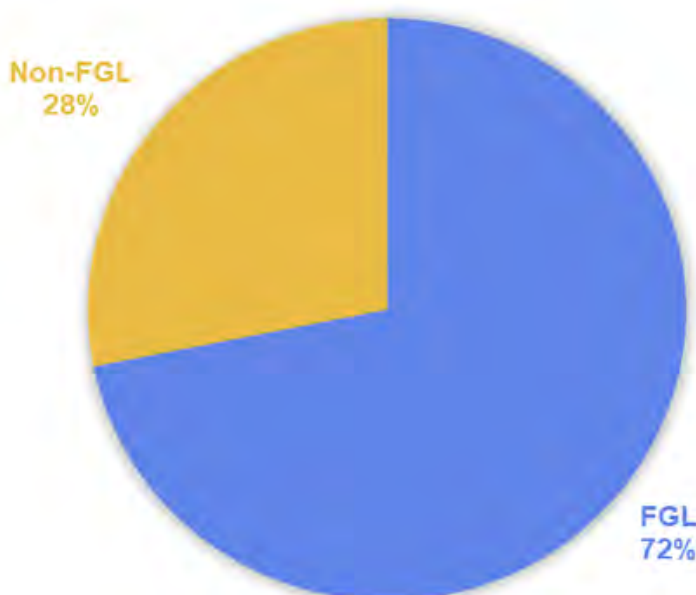


Fig. 3. Representation of First-Generation Learners and Non-First-Generation Learners

This gap in guidance from close or immediate family members contributed to uncertainty around academic decisions and long-term career planning. As a result, **more than half of first-generation learners expressed uncertainty about their future pathways**. 64% of first- generation learners perceived out-migration for work as the most viable future option, even when these options were associated with risk or uncertainty.

Financial stress emerged as a near-universal concern among first-generation learners. The average yearly income category of the families of first-generation students ranges from below Rs. 50,000 to Rs. 1 lakh. Around 30% first-generation families lived on an annual income of less than Rs. 50,000, making them the most economically vulnerable section of the student community compared to non-first-generation learners in the sample group. Amongst the various caste and ethnic groups, the Scheduled Caste and Other Backward Classes groups were reported as being the most economically vulnerable (Table 5).



Fig. 4. Economic Profile According to Ethnicity

Ethnic category	Distribution (percentage)
Scheduled Tribes	32
Other Backward Classes	38
General	22
Scheduled Caste	8

Table 5. Ethnicity-wise distribution of first-generation learners in the survey

Female students were reported to be more regular and diligent by their teachers. **However, more female respondents reported belonging to an economically vulnerable group.** Therefore, their economic vulnerability makes them more susceptible to discontinuing education.

Access to digital resources was also uneven amongst this group: only 26% of the students reported having access to both smartphones and computers. Majority students did not own laptops, affecting their ability to engage with online learning and access information.

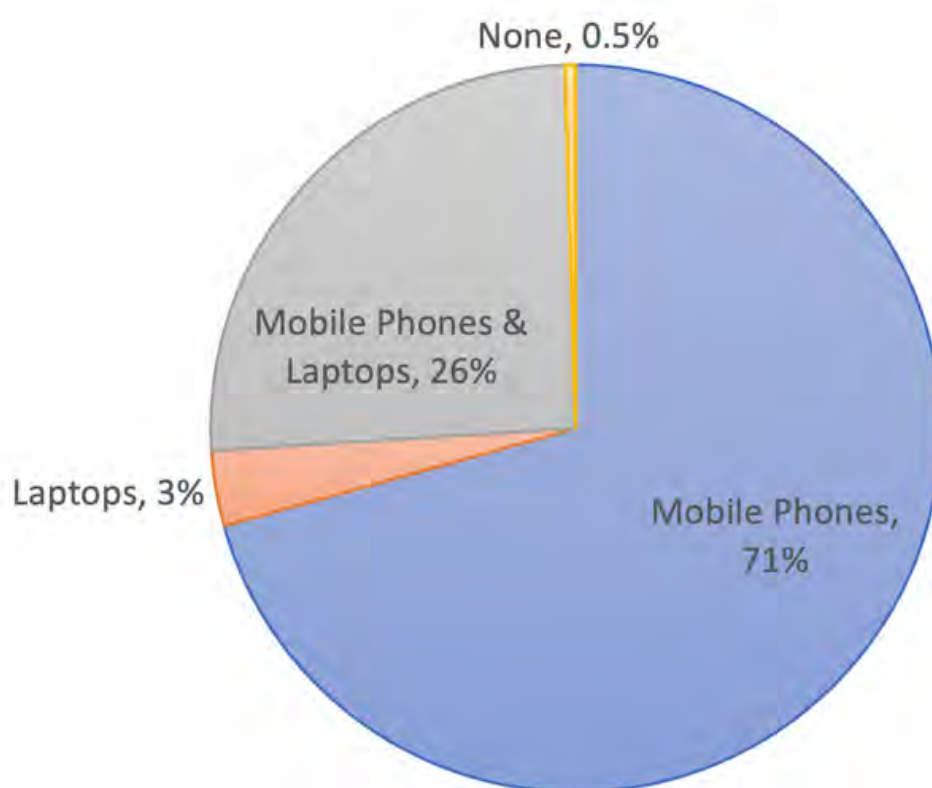


Fig. 5. Student Access to Digital Technology

7.1.2. Compounded Inequities in Youth Transitions

“Interviewer : So what is your dream career then?”

Respondent : *Actually, I wanted to do a PhD, but then, looking at my family, I have to look after my mother and all. So, a PhD will be a long-term study”*

Sangay, Bijanbari

Economic vulnerability, lack of guidance, mentorship, access to technology, etc., cut across the entire student population, irrespective of their first-generation status, leaving most students unable to make informed choices during their undergraduate journeys.

Overall, the findings indicate that the lack of clarity around **aspirations is shaped less by individual motivation and more by institutional and structural constraints**. For instance, financial stress emerged as one of the primary challenges faced by students.

Almost all the interviewees stated that they were financially supported by their immediate or extended families. However, as illustrated in Fig. 6, the average household income of the students’ families is less than Rs. 1 lakh annually.⁴⁴ **This income profile highlights the economic context within which students are navigating their education and career choices.**

Simultaneously, with the closure of many tea gardens, which are still the primary employers in the region, many families are facing multi-generational unemployment.

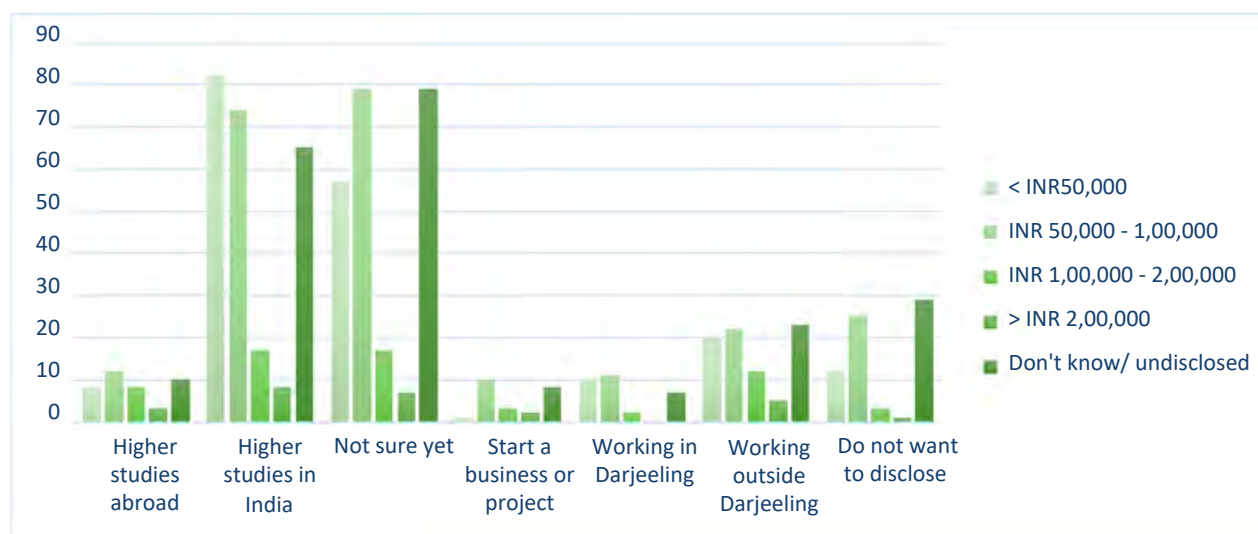


Fig. 6. Average Annual Income Categories According to Aspirations

⁴⁴For annual household income in India, and pre-and-post COVID19 household incomes see: <https://www.price360.in/publication-details.php?url=incomes-up-since-covid-but-poorest-20-still-below-fy16-level-price-study>

Majority of the student respondents had transitioned from the West Bengal State Board/ Madhyamik board, which could present new challenges like difficulties related to English as the language of instruction, teaching and learning styles, and transportation availability and costs.

Additionally, as noted by a teacher from a regional college, the educational and infrastructural quality of feeder schools in regional areas usually do not match that of the colleges. Overwhelmed with different subjects, the depth and range of the syllabus, etc., many students choose to leave, and instead work in the informal sector.

Teachers also reported **high student absenteeism and low parental engagement** in the higher education of their wards. This perhaps pertains to the socio-economic pressures of families who are mostly engaged with daily-wage labour; meeting basic needs is the priority, and sustained parental support for education is often unrealistic.

As mentioned in the preceding section, more female respondents reported belonging to economically vulnerable families than their male counterparts. Women generally also have to subscribe more to societal norms around their mobility, freedom, as well as family responsibilities. Thus, the aspirations of female respondents are shaped by the intersection of their pre-existing economic vulnerability and gendered societal norms and expectations.⁴⁵

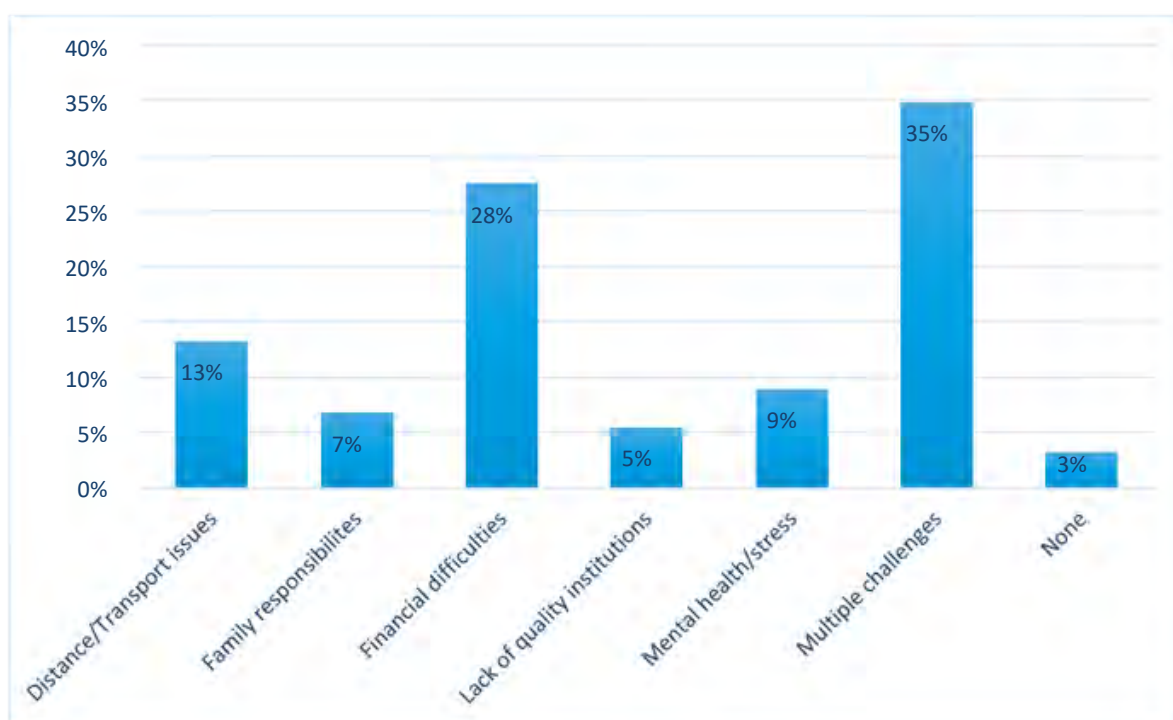


Fig. 7 Challenges Faced by Students

⁴⁵ Tamang, Rinchen and Lavanya, Pothu. "A Study on Challenges, Aspirations and Educational Empowerment of Women College Students from Tea Garden Areas of Darjeeling." Excellence Educational Journal of Education and Research 2025, 18(3):167-174.

Nearly 40% of the students reported facing multiple, overlapping problems.

Inadequate and often perfunctory mental health support and career guidance, poor infrastructural connectivity to colleges, geographic isolation, and insufficient academic and technological support challenged student motivation to pursue and continue higher education. These challenges were more pronounced in rural areas.

40% of students also said they **did not find it easy to make friends**, and 50% of the students rarely participated in civic and community events, and some never. Mental health challenges were also the highest reported amongst students who lacked clarity about their aspirations.

These trends highlight increasing social isolation, which impacts mental health and other coping mechanisms. Schemes such as Taruner Swapna have been launched by the Government of West Bengal, but the lack of student access to technology means that these schemes are not being implemented and used efficiently.

7.1.3. Institutional Constraints & Access Gaps

*"I would like certain private sectors to also give... job opportunities to all the people and I guess for education maybe better counselling and not just counselling but real support because after counselling they just disappear and we don't have any access to their contacts. Even if they do give their contacts they won't be able to help much. We won't know where to apply, what to do next. **And we're just stuck in that loop.**"*

Sonam, Kalimpong

While students can avail of different scholarships offered by the Central and State governments, they face significant institutional impediments like information gaps, administrative barriers and limited guidance. Out of 839 students surveyed, **only 25% had availed of different scholarships or stipends**, and this despite the majority meeting the economic eligibility criteria.

Support mechanisms varied widely across colleges. Some colleges provided active assistance, designating officers to help the students, while in some other colleges staff contributed their own personal funds to support deserving students (notably in Mirik and Gorubathan). In most colleges, the responsibility was entirely on the students to identify and apply for available scholarships, with no guidance or institutional support.

More than 50% of the students surveyed reported having little or no awareness of the different types of scholarships available. The data points to a multi-layered set of challenges:

- some students did not have any awareness of the different kinds of scholarship;
- many came to know about these once they joined their college;
- others lacked the information or guidance on application procedures, eligibility requirements, or deadlines;
- some did not have the required caste /ethnicity certificate or salary certificate of their guardians;
- many did not know how to navigate institutional bureaucracy.

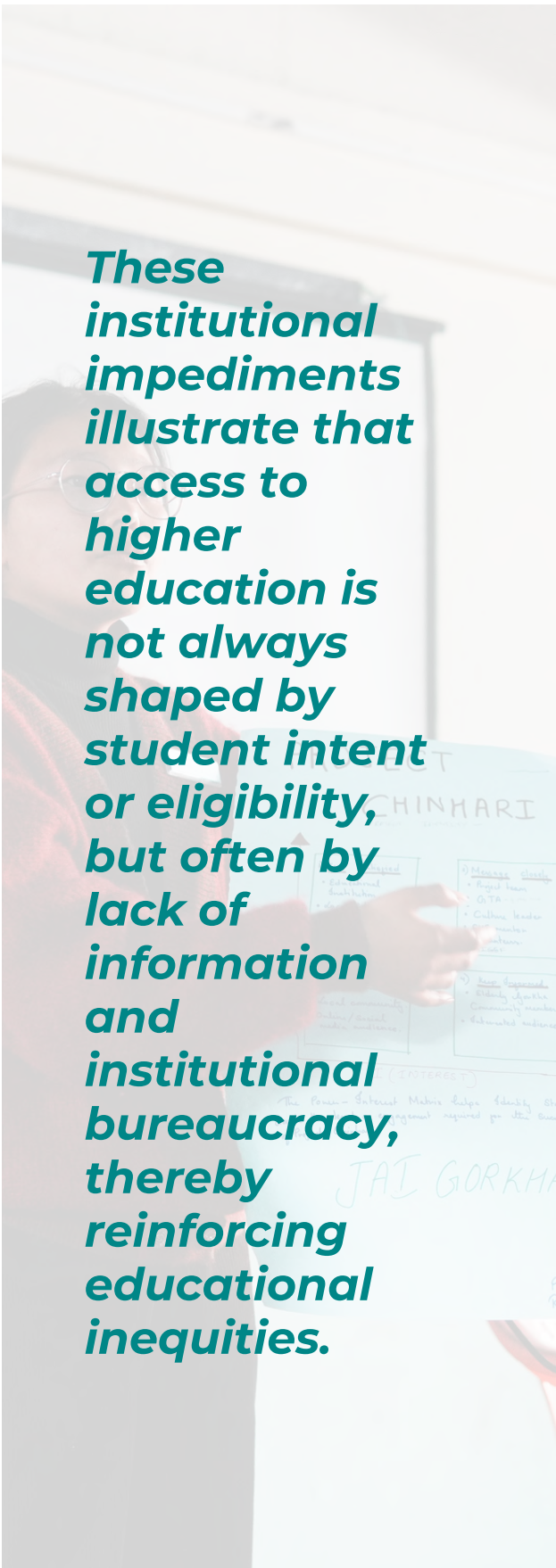
This unevenness highlights the need for more direct information, guidance, mentorship, and greater administrative support from government departments, scholarship nodal offices and college staff.

Beyond scholarships, respondents working in the education sector reported a widespread lack of awareness and sensitization regarding different government schemes that are available. They stated that this could perhaps be attributed to the power division and politics between the state government and the GTA, leading to limited outreach, implementation and access of central schemes in the hills.

Student motivation and aspiration are constrained by deep structural and social inequities. Economic hardships, lack of guidance and mentorship, eligibility, technological handicaps, access to institutions and infrastructure, collectively shape what students perceive as possible or attainable.

These constraints are reinforced further by socio-cultural norms that privilege certain forms of employment as more valuable, respectable and stable, thereby further shrinking the aspirations of students.

These situations and circumstances have a compounding effect on students' choices and actions, creating a **sliding scale of vulnerability** that affect students in different ways. Thus, in the absence of sustained and structured support systems, the disconnect between aspirations and actionable pathways is most likely to increase, and **for many students, there will be no careers, only employment.**



These institutional impediments illustrate that access to higher education is not always shaped by student intent or eligibility, but often by lack of information and institutional bureaucracy, thereby reinforcing educational inequities.

7.1.4. Case Study: College Drop-out

Bikash's Journey

Drop-outs are a constant part of the narrative around youth education in the hills. However, drop-outs were harder to capture in this project as they no longer attended colleges where the survey and interviews took place. The project team was able to interview one dropout whose story reflects some of the typical circumstances facing youth in the region.

Bikash is 25 and dropped out of college at age 22. A member of the Rai ethnic group, Bikash completed his diploma in Bangalore before returning to college in his hometown in the hills to commence their Bachelor of Arts in 2021. Bikash's interest in college was purely to obtain his Bachelor's Degree. He had few expectations about college and saw it as a pathway to employment and a way of fulfilling his dreams of financial independence.

Bikash's experience of college was shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic in some ways; most of the learning was online, which limited interactions with peers, limited access to staff and resources. Bikash noted that there were no classes, all the exams were online, and this whole situation bored them. On asking whether they were not attending classes or there were actually no classes being conducted, they said "*online classes gareko jastai garthyo*" (they used to make it look like they were conducting online classes) and "*bhako ra na bhako eutai ho*" (it did not make any difference).

While these circumstances may be particular to the 2021-2022 cohort, they are shared by thousands of students attending college during these years and are likely more impactful for commencing students rather than returning students with established relationships with peers and staff. Further research into the pathways of students from these years is necessary to understand the impacts of disruptive 'events' on education in the region (pandemics, bandhs, industrial action, extreme weather, landslides, etc.). Furthermore, Bikash's lack of belonging to the college upon commencement suggests that on-campus learning is important for acclimatising to a new college environment. It is easier to drop out if no one notices you are gone.

Bikash's decision to drop out of college was boosted by problems with documents. After the first semester exams, he received results with his name misspelt. Bikash attempted to have this corrected, and while he received some assurances from college administrators, the mistake was repeated again in his second semester. Responsibility for making the correction was passed on between the college and the larger university system without resolution. The saga over the documents dragged into his second year and soured Bikash's experience of college further.

Bikash figured that even if he passed and earned his degree, the mistake in the documents would reduce its value and create future problems that he would have to resolve. The sense of powerlessness in the face of bureaucracy is not uncommon in the region, and in Bikash's case, this sense of powerlessness wore him down.

Bikash has no plans to return to college. He views college as useful for students who do well and want to move on to take civil services exams, but far less useful for students who are struggling. Bikash feels that there should be more intervention with students struggling in college, and if they don't have the ambition or need for the degree, then it is not worth going through the stress. For Bikash, this is part of a larger issue; '80-90% of students' have 'no idea what they are doing' by going to college in the first place. They rarely have discussions about their future or plan how their degree will lead them to the kinds of jobs they want or that are available. This kind of career planning needs to happen earlier, perhaps even in school. Once students are in college, it is difficult to change their minds, to change their path of study. And in some cases, it is easier to drop out than make a switch in this education system. Bikash identified this as a major dilemma.

Since dropping out, Bikash has been hustling. Like many youths in the region, he gets by on a combination of a role in the family's small business, freelancing, and 'figuring out'. He can sustain himself like this, but stresses that this is not sufficient to start a family or achieve the financial independence that he covets. For that, he believes he must go outside of Darjeeling and even outside of India. He believes that going abroad is the best option to earn an income and return with some kind of advantage, an advantage that he had hoped to get from earning his degree before dropping out.

Bikash acknowledges that some of the colleges in Darjeeling and Kalimpong are in a much better condition following the COVID-19 pandemic. However, he is still sceptical about whether college is the most useful pathway for youth without guaranteed jobs at the end of the degree. He believes that if there were such a guarantee, there would be far fewer drop-outs and the value of college education would be much clearer to youth from different backgrounds.

7.2. The Education to Employment Disconnect

*“And here, what is it like? In the Hills, if someone is earning, like doing school duty in cars, I don't think people will be interested in studying, but they will go for doing the school duty because there is money. People are mainly focused on the money factor. **Because 90% of the people are not fortunate enough, they cannot go outside to study.** Only 10% of the people can do that. So, they just want to quickly earn...So, I can understand where it is coming from. I think also, there is a lazy factor that students in our hills have, they don't want to go ahead, but they pick money....And one thing that I want to say, the number of libraries in our town and the number of lottery shops that we have, shows where people are more interested.”*

Tashi, Kalimpong

*“The next generation must be equipped not only with degrees but also with actionable skills, entrepreneurial confidence, and structured opportunities. Without these, **education risks becoming symbolic** rather than economically meaningful.”*

Dilip, Darjeeling

Unemployment and underemployment are the biggest problems in the Darjeeling and Kalimpong hills. The local economy is reliant on tea production, tourism and agriculture (especially in Kalimpong district) – which are seasonal, prone to fluctuations, and already saturated.

Many educators highlighted that there is an apparent mismatch between the courses being offered by colleges and the new opportunities in the labour market. However, education-aligned employment would require a complete overhaul of the economy and administrative independence to make locally and regionally relevant decisions.

Exploring emerging or alternative careers is a privilege that requires financial security, access to information, guidance and the capacity to absorb risk. Most of the students surveyed do not have safety nets or fall-back options.

Caste and ethnic reservations in employment were also perceived to be barriers to employment. Student respondents belonging to the General and Other Backward Classes, in particular, felt disadvantaged, leading to demotivation and disengagement. This *perceived* structural inequity has resulted in psychological barriers, which in turn affected academic motivation, career planning, participation in competitive exams etc.

In response to uncertainty around their post-graduation lives, students were also trying to spread their risks and increase their employment opportunities by pursuing short-term vocational courses such as communicative English, computer training, or cabin crew training, whilst enrolled in their undergraduate courses. However, only **7%** of the students surveyed reported **undergoing vocational training**, which was self-funded and primarily being pursued to develop practical skills, build confidence and enhance future employability. Most vocational courses and internships were not directly related to the courses that the students were pursuing. This suggests that access to **relevant, affordable, and well-integrated vocational options remains limited**.

In the absence of guided career counselling, clear information on alternative pathways to continuing education, and integration of vocational training or internships with higher education, students' decisions to drop out were not always based on informed choices.

This, in turn, can increase the precarity and vulnerability of a group that is already at risk. **There is an urgent need for diverse opportunities and alternative learning spaces where students can explore different fields according to their skills and interests.**

Against this background of changing aspirations and stagnant career pathways, respondents working in the higher education sector, especially in peri-urban colleges, reported a decline in student attendance and retention rates. Interviews with principals, instructors, and administrative personnel from various institutions revealed a persisting belief that while access to higher education has grown in terms of its geographical reach, **the quality of education, infrastructure and student engagement have declined steadily** over the years.



Teachers and education professionals observed that many students are recalibrating their education and career choices, with a growing number forgoing education for employment in the hospitality sector, the army (especially Agniveer program), nursing and teaching in private schools.

Under the New Education Policy 2020,⁴⁶ students can drop out of undergraduate programs after a year and still receive a certificate. According to higher education professionals, this provision has bolstered students to drop out of undergraduate education when facing financial precarity, family responsibilities, as well as the desire to jump-start their professional lives. For many students and families, investing in three-four years of education that offer limited employment guarantees is simply not practical.

While the decision to pursue employment, rather than education, might reflect a student's adaptability and agency, these choices, however, appear to be influenced more by aspirational exposure (internet, peers, migration trends) than by local opportunity or institutional career guidance.

⁴⁶ According to the New Education Policy 2020 Section 11.9 "The structure and lengths of degree programmes shall be adjusted accordingly. The undergraduate degree will be of either 3 or 4-year duration, with multiple exit options within this period, with appropriate certifications, e.g., a certificate after completing 1 year in a discipline or field including vocational and professional areas, or a diploma after 2 years of study, or a Bachelor's degree after a 3-year programme. The 4-year multidisciplinary Bachelor's programme, however, shall be the preferred option since it allows the opportunity to experience the full range of holistic and multidisciplinary education in addition to a focus on the chosen major and minors as per the choices of the student. An Academic Bank of Credit (ABC) shall be established which would digitally store the academic credits earned from various recognized HEIs so that the degrees from an HEI can be awarded taking into account credits earned. The 4-year programme may also lead to a degree 'with Research' if the student completes a rigorous research project in their major area(s) of study as specified by the HEI."

See https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf

7.2.1. Out-migration for employment

*"I see my students also, they need everything so fast and in bulk, everything. So, I think that kind of mentality is the norm of society right now. I think, with the young people it could be due to the internet use, also because everything is very fast. You get all the information just with a blink of an eye, just with a click. **In real life, you don't find everything just with a click.** So, there are things you need to pursue, you need to do things to reach there."*

Rahul, Gorubathan

Out-migration for employment has emerged as a very prominent trend amongst young adults in the region. **Three out of four (75%) youths surveyed wanted to out-migrate for work,** and **47%** reported that finding **employment locally was extremely difficult.**

One of the recurrent themes amongst all respondents was a strong and growing sense of discouragement and disenchantment with the current political and economic institutions, which were perceived to be inequitable and failing to generate meaningful employment options.

Although the majority of respondents did not participate in any political activities, **43% believed that political connections were important to access work, and/or admissions in colleges.** Irrespective of its factual accuracy, perceptions around nepotism and an unequal playing field play a very important role in student motivation and aspirations, or lack thereof.

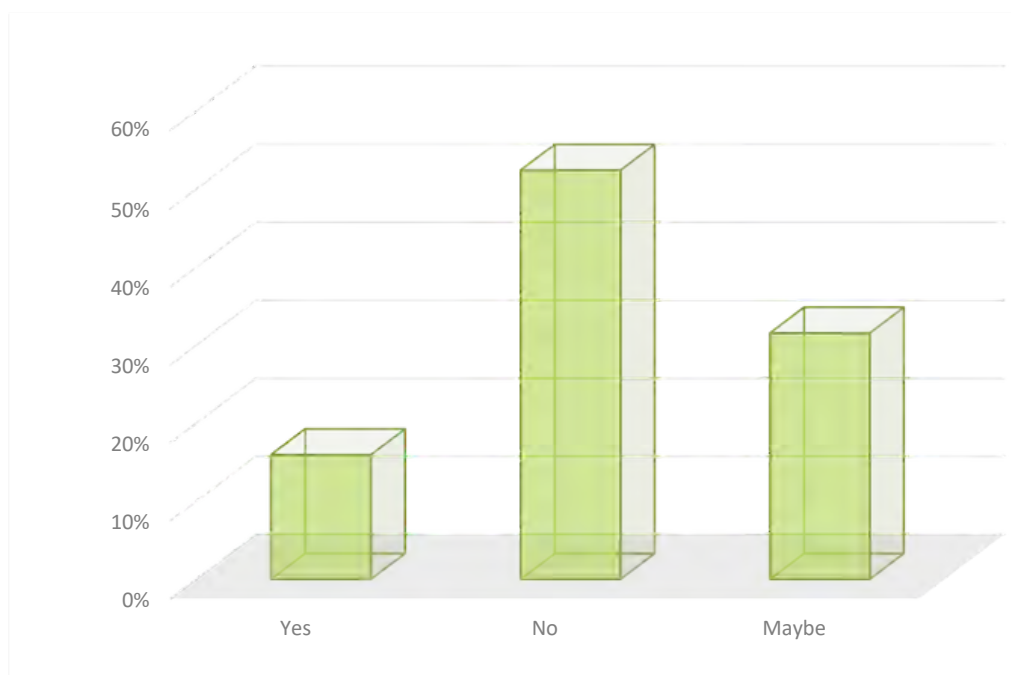


Fig. 8. Student Perceptions Around Education and Employment: Are there sufficient educational and employment opportunities in the hills?

Migration for employment is shaped by:

- (i) saturation and/or shrinkage of the local economy, which is dependent on tea and tourism;
- (ii) disconnect between education and employment opportunities;
- (iii) intergenerational change in employment aspirations from rural, agricultural to more professional roles.

Out-migration reflects a lack of opportunities locally. Most teachers and higher education professionals reported clear gendered patterns in migration-linked dropouts. Young men were most likely to leave college to join the Indian army's Agniveer programme, while women were likely to drop out to pursue nursing, work in airlines or in hospitality and service industries.

“**Migration for employment has emerged as a default coping strategy for young adults**”

Many students were also dropping out to work in entry-level positions in the informal sector, locally or regionally, which is precarious and does not offer long-term financial security. A teacher-in-charge at one of the regional colleges noted that recruitment agents from regularly visited *kamaans* (tea estates) to enlist young workers, which also contributed to increasing drop-out rates. There is also an increasing trend of young adults migrating further afield to other parts of India or even the Middle East to work in the hospitality or age-care sectors. Thus, while many young adults are out-migrating, they are not necessarily transitioning towards stable, safe or secure careers.

This also indicates the need or preference of young adults to choose employment over education, even in stagnant job positions for most of their adult life. Skill-development from work experience, which would help their economic mobility, is not always the primary focus, leading to stagnation in their financial and professional growth. Thus, young adults are making important and often long-term decisions without structured counselling on employment options in the informal sector and guidance on how to navigate this sector.

Apart from employment, young adults were also migrating for education, particularly for access to *perceived* better education and competitive exam coaching. Only **12%** of the students surveyed felt that the **quality of education in the region was excellent**; the majority perceived it to be good to average.

Higher education professionals acknowledged a widespread perception of superiority amongst students of private colleges (like Salesian College, St. Joseph's), and especially those located in the plains. Academic curriculum, teaching and even students were perceived to be better in terms of academic rigour, discipline and exposure. Despite the availability of coaching classes in the hills, student respondents also perceived coaching centres in the plains to be more serious, offering higher value and a greater chance of success.

8. Recommendations

The current status of the youth in the Darjeeling and Kalimpong hills calls for urgent, cohesive and context-specific interventions that can help steer the futures of the youth of the region. However, the findings of the survey reveal that the challenges are not sector-specific; they are structural, systemic and shaped by intersecting inequities.

The education, employment and opportunities landscape is deeply uneven; those with greater access to resources and networks have a better chance of succeeding, while the vulnerable risk being excluded further. In the absence of a broader structural overhaul, these inequities will continue to intensify. This is a generation that is on the edge of precarity; relatively small shocks – economic, familial, institutional – can trigger long-term setbacks.

Recognizing the absence of institutional reforms, and Eastern Himalayan Foundation's role as a catalytic and enabling actor, the following recommendations focus on strengthening EHF's role in providing guidance, reducing risks and helping students navigate their educational journeys.

The recommendations below envision EHF working both independently and in collaboration with colleges, government bodies, and civil society organisations.

1. Guidance and Mentorship Ecosystems

(Enrolment, scholarships, admissions, career options)

- On-campus career guidance camps across colleges in the region, starting from the first year of undergraduate study, and followed through in the second and third years. Attention should be on aligning students' undergraduate courses with a career focus.
- Mentorship programmes that connect students with alumni, local professionals, civil society organisations, and graduates from emerging and alternative fields to expand exposure to diverse career pathways.
- Targeted guidance on government examinations – procedure, eligibility, language requirements, timeline. A bilingual online guidance tool can be developed, which can be accessed by students.
- Greater and frequent collaboration with colleges and government agencies offering scholarships and stipends to improve the dissemination of information.
- Strengthen coordination between state government departments, GTA, educational institutions, and local organisations to ensure effective implementation of existing schemes.

2. Expanding Career, Labour-Market and Migration Awareness

- Promote exposure and interactions with professionals and industry representatives to help students understand labour market realities. Career guidance can help young people understand how different employment pathways may contribute to longer-term skills, mobility and economic security.
- Increase partnership and training with local enterprises and industry to ensure skill programmes align with actual demand in the local market.
- Provide guided counselling in colleges on employment in the informal sector, including workers' rights, migration risks, and legitimate and safe pathways to the informal sector. Engagement and interaction with individuals already working in the sector or returnee migrants should be a priority.
- Developing partnerships with local communities to co-create outreach strategies to improve parental understanding of different higher education pathways, managing expectations, and increasing engagement in their wards' education.



3. Targeted support for vulnerable groups

- Gender-responsive career counselling focussing on the distinct challenges faced by women and mentorship by women professionals from different sectors.
- Peer-to-peer mentoring of first-generational learners with a clear focus on the challenges that are unique to them.
- Increased access to information and support for mental health services through referrals and partnerships with relevant organisations.

9. Areas for Future Research

This research has identified key research gaps requiring further in-depth inquiry, which will be valuable for the Eastern Himalayan Foundation and other organisations and government departments working with youth in the region.

1. Gender, Education, Employment and Mobility

As identified in this project, aspirations, barriers and pathways through education and employment are heavily gendered. Women's experience of precarity is mediated by their position within the family, community, and additional carer responsibilities. These factors also shape their career, aspirations and mobility. However, gendered experiences of education and employment are often overlooked and homogenised within the broader student experience framework. Research pertaining to women's experience of the education landscape would produce important and valuable insights on the status of women students, educational institutes and the labour market.

2. Transitions from Education to Employment

Migration for employment is a trend and an aspiration amongst young adults in the Darjeeling and Kalimpong hills. Given the likely acceleration of out-migration for employment among young people, deeper knowledge of decision-making, experiences of migration and return, and risk navigation are vital in ensuring safe transition pathways. Research on these issues will inform how institutions can help prepare their students for these realities.

3. Changing Educational Landscape: The Ongoing Effects of COVID-19 and Gorkhaland agitation

Many educators and student respondents discussed the impacts of COVID-19 on their student community and the education landscape generally. However, the pandemic also seems to have shaped student capabilities and aspirations in different ways, which have affected their careers and life choices. Research on 'COVID-students' would provide interesting insights into how technological access and knowledge might just be the next barrier, segregating and withholding students from succeeding.

Volunteers

St. Joseph's College

**Prajali Chettri
Daniel Anmol Rai**

Southfield College

**Ashima Rai
Mahek Gupta**

**Darjeeling Government
College**

**Jharna Brahmin
Ashika Rai**

**Bijanbari Degree
College**

**Rupesh Pradhan
Dachehi Sherpa
Kiran Subba
Kala Subba**

Kurseong

**Lambamayum Jenita Devi
Abhishek Rai
Abdul Lathif Paul
Nirupama Chaudhury
Jayashree Sanyal**

Sonada Degree College

**Adityaraj Kanaujia
Arbin Chettri
Amit Kumar Jamatia
Nikita Kumari Thakur
Prashant Thapa
Babita Lama**

Salesian College

**Meghna Lama
Diya Thakuri
Riya Thakuri
Anjuli Tamang**

**Pedong Cluny Women's
College**

**Sramistha Gurung
Anugrah Sherpa**

Kalimpong College

**Binay Chettri
Astha Subba
Pawan Kumar Prasad
Nitesh Sharma**

**Government General
Degree College, Pedong**

**Yangila Bhutia
Anuka Rai
Awasi Rai**

West Bengal Government Schemes¹

Aikyashree Scholarship Scheme ²	Minority Affairs and Madrasha Education Department	Scholarships for Minority Students
Bhabishyat Credit Card Scheme ³	Department of Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises and Textiles	The objective of the scheme is to provide the Youth of West Bengal, who have entrepreneurial skill and want to be self-reliant by setting up micro enterprises, access to institutional finance for their credit needs. This will in turn facilitate the Youth to become self-employed leading to income generation, wealth creation, and creation of further employment opportunities in rural and urban areas of the State.
Gatidhara Scheme ⁴	Transport Department	To encourage unemployed youths to take up transport as the means of livelihood. Under this project loans in easy terms to buy cars/ trucks/ lorries etc. are made available either through Regional Transport Officer or through bank.
Kanyashree Prakalpa ⁵	Women Development and Social Welfare Department	a conditional cash transfer scheme with the aim of improving the status and well being of the girl child in West Bengal by incentivizing schooling of all teenage girls and delaying their marriages until the age of 18, the legal age of marriage.
Karma Sathi Prakalpa ⁶	Department of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises and Textiles	To facilitate young entrepreneurs of the state in setting up new manufacturing enterprises and small businesses including services and training. To create gainful self-employment opportunity in both rural and urban areas of the state

¹ <https://wbxpress.com/schemes/>

² <https://wbxpress.com/aikyashree/>

³ <https://wbxpress.com/west-bengal-bhabishyat-credit-card-scheme-wbbccs/>

⁴ <https://wbxpress.com/gatidhara-scheme/>

⁵ <https://wbxpress.com/kanyashree-prakalpa-west-bengal/>

⁶ <https://wbxpress.com/files/2021/01/1825-MSMET.pdf>

Paray Shikshalay ⁷	West Bengal Board of Madrasah Education	Learning at Community level for Primary level students in Covid times
Rupashree Prakalpa	Department of Women and Child Development and Social Welfare	In this scheme one time financial grant of Rs. 25,000/- will be given to girls above 18 years old for marriage purpose. The girl's family income should be less than Rs. 1,50,000/- per year.
Sabooj Sathi Scheme	Backward Classes Welfare Department	Under this scheme 70 lac students of the state studying between Class IX and Class XII in government/ government recognised regular schools/ madrasahs or equivalent got cycles for commuting to schools.
Sabala Scheme for Adolescent Girls ⁸	Women & Child Development and Social Welfare Department	Empowering Adolescent Girls of 11 to 18 years by improving their nutritional and health status, up gradation of home skills, life skills and vocational skills. The girls would be equipped with information on health and family welfare, hygiene and guidance on existing public services. The Scheme also aims to mainstream out of school girls into formal education or non-formal education.
Sikshashree Scheme	Backward Classes Welfare Department and Tribal Welfare Department	To reduce the number of drop-outs the state government has initiated the grant to students of Class V to Class VIII. Students, who do not stay in government hostels and belong to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, are eligible for the grant.
Student Credit Card Scheme	Higher Education Department	loan will be available for undergraduate, postgraduate, doctoral and post-doctoral study in India or abroad. Students till the age of 40 years of age are eligible for the scheme.
Taruner Swapna	Education Department (?) Banglar Shiksha	to facilitate the students to connect their studies with technology.

⁷ <https://wbxpress.com/guidelines-paray-shikshalay-scheme/>

⁸ <https://wbxpress.com/sabala-scheme-adolescent-girls/>

Utkarsh Bangla	Department of Technical Education & Training	Important features of the schemes are as follows: 1. 70% placement/ self-employment out of which 50% wage-based employment has been guaranteed under the scheme for the trainees after completion of the training; and, 2. Assessment and Certification will be done by the West Bengal State Council of Technical and Vocational Education and Skill Development, a Statutory Body under the Technical Education & Training Department.
Schemes for Minority Communities ⁹		Education loan, merit-cum-means scholarships, post matric scholarship, post matric stipend, pre-matric scholarship, vocational training programme, coaching for employment
Yuvasree (Yuva Utsaha Prakaalpa)	Labour Department	The objective of the scheme is to provide unemployment assistance to the enrolled jobseekers of Employment Bank to enable them to upgrade their level of skill in order to make them employable or suitable for setting up of self-employment ventures.

⁹ <https://wbxpress.com/wbmdfc-schemes-overview/>

