



# Gendered motivations and demographic factors in programme selection: A comparative analysis

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**Background:** Global education frameworks increasingly emphasise the alignment of academic programmes with labour market demands and equity imperatives. Strengthening career guidance and enhancing curricular relevance are considered essential for supporting informed student decision-making and long-term employability.

**Objectives:** This study investigates motivational dimensions and gender-based differences influencing programme selection among Bachelor of Commerce and Economics students in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the National University of Lesotho. The study explores how demographic profiles and motivational orientations shape academic choices and perceived programme value.

**Methods:** A descriptive quantitative survey was administered to 159 first-year students. Data were analysed by using SPSS for exploratory factor analysis, reliability testing and independent samples *t*-tests to assess gender differences across seven motivational constructs. Chi-square analysis examined associations between gender and programme choice.

**Results:** Seven motivational factors emerged: instructional quality, academic ease, career value, social endorsement, programme popularity, intrinsic interest and prestige. While most factors showed no significant gender differences, male students scored significantly higher on intrinsic interest and future utility. No statistically significant association was found between gender and programme choice.

**Conclusion:** Student decision-making reflects a complex interplay of personal motivations and institutional influences. Although overt gender disparities in programme enrolment are narrowing, motivational differences persist, particularly among male students.

**Contribution:** The study offers actionable insights for gender-sensitive advising, inclusive programme design and strategic planning. The study supports Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4 and SDG 5) by promoting motivation-aware academic environments that foster informed, aspiration-driven choices.

**Keywords:** programme selection; motivation; gender; Bachelor of Commerce; economics; higher education; career aspirations; academic advising.

## Introduction

The transition from secondary education to higher learning represents a critical juncture in a student's academic and professional development. Whether entering college or university, the selection of an academic programme is among the most consequential decisions students make and significantly shapes their career trajectory, personal growth and long-term opportunities (Lombard, 2020; Zaini et al., 2021). A well-aligned programme fosters intellectual engagement, skill development and career readiness, while a misaligned choice may lead to dissatisfaction, disengagement or limited professional mobility (Dillon & Smith, 2020).

While programme selection is often framed as a matter of personal interest or aptitude, students' choices are rarely made in isolation (Matolo et al., 2022). A growing body of literature highlights the influence of external factors such as parental expectations, financial constraints, perceived job security and societal prestige (Brighton College, 2024). For instance, Celmar et al. (2024) found that employability concerns and family input frequently outweigh intrinsic motivation. Similarly, Mulenga and Miyoba (2024) observed that economic considerations and social pressure often override personal aspirations, revealing a disconnect between institutional offerings and student agency.

Compounding these influences is the issue of limited career awareness. Many students make programme decisions based on incomplete information, anecdotal advice or pressure to conform to socially endorsed professions (Bhujbal & Verma, 2024). According to Mowreader (2024), only one in five college students receives adequate education-to-career guidance. This lack of structured support contributes to programme misalignment, academic regret and attrition. Karp et al. (2021) argue that advising practices integrating career exploration and individualised support significantly improve retention and alignment between academic pathways and personal goals.

In the African context, these challenges are intensified by institutional disparities, socioeconomic constraints and evolving labour market demands, particularly the growing emphasis on employability, job security and alignment of academic programmes with workforce needs (Chiramba & Ndofirepi, 2023). Despite the growing importance of higher education in promoting social mobility, limited empirical attention has been paid to how motivational beliefs and demographic characteristics shape programme selection (Anyichie, 2024; OECD, 2022; Wiese et al., 2023). Genderism, the systemic privileging of certain gender identities, continues to influence access to specific fields of study, reinforcing occupational stereotypes and limiting students' freedom to pursue programmes aligned with their interests and capabilities (Kiprop, 2025; Modungwa, 2015; Mulwa, 2021).

This study investigates the motivational and demographic predictors of academic programme selection among students enrolled in the Bachelor of Commerce (B. Com) and Economics programme at the National University of Lesotho's Faculty of Social Sciences. Although both programmes share a thematic focus on economic systems and policy, they differ in academic orientation and career trajectories: the B. Com degree emphasises applied business and managerial skills, while the economics programme leads to a Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree that offers a theoretical foundation geared towards research and policy analysis (Chitkara University, 2023).

The aim of this study is to examine how motivations shaped by gender norms and demographic factors influence students' academic programme choices. The specific objectives are to:

- Identify key motivational factors influencing programme selection.
- Examine gender differences in motivational profiles.
- Analyse the relationship between demographic variables and programme choice.
- Propose evidence-based recommendations to strengthen career guidance and promote equitable access.

## Literature review

### Motivational drivers in academic programme selection

Students' academic programme choices are shaped by a dynamic mix of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, including personal interest, perceived utility and social expectations

(Bergann et al., 2025). Zaini et al. (2021) highlight intrinsic factors such as intellectual curiosity and enjoyment, while extrinsic drivers include career prospects, financial incentives and social prestige. Mwantimwa (2021) adds that alignment between programme choice and personal aspirations enhances academic satisfaction and persistence. These findings underscore the need to recognise motivational diversity when designing institutional support strategies.

### Demographic influences on programme choice

Gender significantly shapes programme selection, with global data showing a predominance of female students in disciplines like social sciences and humanities (UNESCO, 2022). Geographic location also plays a role, especially for students from rural or underserved areas. Sadjail et al. (2022) found that such students often choose programmes based on proximity, affordability and job market outcomes rather than disciplinary interest. These patterns reflect ongoing structural inequalities in access to higher education. Collectively, the studies emphasise that programme choice is a socially embedded decision influenced by intersecting demographic factors. Understanding these dynamics is vital for crafting equitable policies and targeted institutional support (Tavares et al., 2022).

### Gender and programme choice

Genderism, the systemic privileging of one gender over others, continues to shape access, experiences and outcomes in higher education (Farmer et al., 2019). Despite equity policies, structural biases persist in programme offerings, faculty representation and career pathways (Griffin, 2019). Intersectionality, as conceptualised by Crenshaw (1989), offers a lens to examine how overlapping identities compound educational disadvantage. Recent scholarship extends this framework to higher education contexts, highlighting how institutional policies and social class dynamics reproduce inequalities (Beeckmans et al., 2023; Fernandez et al., 2024). In African contexts, gender disparities are intensified by socio-cultural expectations and institutional constraints. Mokoena and Dlamini (2023) note that female STEM students face implicit bias, limited mentorship and exclusionary cultures, while male students in female-dominated fields encounter stigma and identity conflict (Tshabalala, 2024).

Intersectional analysis shows that gender alone cannot explain disparities in programme selection or success. Nyarko and Boateng (2022) found that rural, low-income female students face barriers like limited resources and early marriage expectations. Institutional factors such as the language of instruction, campus safety and availability of financial aid disproportionately affect marginalised groups. Higher education institutions often struggle to address these layered inequities. Gender mainstreaming efforts lack intersectional sensitivity and overlook how gender, class and ethnicity shape student experiences (Fernandez et al., 2024). As Chikoko (2025) argues, treating gender as a monolith

risks missing the nuanced realities of students. Equity frameworks must integrate intersectionality into curriculum, support services and institutional policy.

### **Institutional support and career guidance**

Effective academic advising is essential for informed programme selection. Karp et al. (2021) advocate for models that combine career exploration, motivational interviewing and personalised support. Yet, Mowreader (2024) notes that only 20% of students receive adequate education-to-career guidance, resulting in misalignment between academic paths and career goals. Lombard (2020) highlights a transition programme like JuniorTukkie, which supports students moving from secondary to tertiary education. These initiatives improve retention and satisfaction, particularly for first-generation and under-resourced students, by fostering inclusive environments and expanding academic support (Bassett, 2023). These findings stress the need for proactive, equity-driven institutional support.

Despite global insights into advising and programme selection, African institutions remain underrepresented in empirical research. Anyichie (2024) calls for localised studies that reflect regional labour markets, particularly the demand for specific skills, employment opportunities and wage prospects, alongside cultural dynamics and institutional realities. Without such evidence, policy interventions risk misalignment with student needs and institutional capacities.

### **Theoretical framework**

This study explores how demographic factors shape students' motivation for academic programme selection, drawing on Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT) (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Self-determination theory distinguishes between intrinsic drivers, such as subject passion and curiosity, and extrinsic influences like financial incentives, parental expectations and career stability. Students with greater autonomy tend to choose programmes based on personal interest, while those under external pressure often prioritise economically secure or socially prestigious fields (De la Fuente et al., 2020). Expectancy-Value Theory complements this by examining students' confidence in succeeding (expectancy) and perceived programme benefits (value). Student characteristics such as age, socioeconomic status, gender and parental influence shape these perceptions. Students from lower-income backgrounds often pursue high-earning disciplines, while those with financial stability lean towards personally meaningful fields (Sadjail et al., 2022). Gender norms also influence choices, with female students more likely to enrol in social sciences as a result of career expectations (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Koçak et al., 2021). Integrating SDT and EVT offers a comprehensive lens for analysing how internal aspirations and external constraints interact in academic decision-making, especially within unequal systems (Kurlander & Hibel, 2018; Urhahne & Wijnia, 2023). Applied within Lesotho's higher education

and examined through gender–socioeconomic intersections, this integration extends established theories to a new context and highlights equity-focused programme choice. These theories also guide the study's methodology. Self-determination theory informs the categorisation of motivation into intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions, measured through scaled survey items on interest, autonomy and external influence. Expectancy-Value Theory supports variables related to academic confidence and perceived programme value, enabling nuanced analysis across demographic groups (Rosenzweig et al., 2019). A quantitative design with stratified sampling ensures representation across age, gender and socioeconomic strata for comparative analysis of motivational patterns.

### **Research methods and design**

Guided by SDT and EVT, the research design directly linked motivational constructs to the study objectives. This theoretical foundation informed the sampling strategy and analytic choices. This study employs a descriptive quantitative survey design to examine motivational dimensions and gender-based differences in programme selection among Bachelor of Commerce and Economics students at the National University of Lesotho (NUL). This approach enables the identification of observable patterns in student decision-making and provides a structured framework for analysing academic choices across a defined population (Bryman, 2016). The approach supports the study's aim of tracking trends in motivation across gender and socioeconomic lines, documenting career trajectories, institutional influences and social expectations (Creswell, 2014). By focusing on 'what' students choose and 'how' they express motivation rather than the causal 'why', the design reflects a positivist epistemology, emphasising empirical observation and generalisable insight (Taylor & Medina, 2013).

### **Reliability and validity**

The revised questionnaire preserved essential motivational dimensions originally validated by Ma et al. (2021), including academic ease, career relevance and social influence, each of which demonstrated robust internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha > 0.7$ ) in prior applications. Survey items were mapped onto established theoretical frameworks to ensure construct validity, notably the integrative model proposed by Labib et al. (2021), which synthesises elements from EVT, SDT and achievement goal theory.

### **Population and sampling**

A stratified random sampling technique was used to ensure equitable representation and valid comparisons, with gender as the primary stratification variable (Creswell, 2014). This method minimised bias and supported balanced subgroup analysis. The target population included undergraduate students enrolled in the Bachelor of Commerce and Economics programmes at the NUL during the 2024–2025

academic year. According to official records, 159 students were registered across these programmes. This cohort was ideal, having recently completed their major selection, offering a timely opportunity to examine motivational factors and gender-based differences in programme choice. To ensure equitable representation and valid comparisons, a stratified random sampling technique was used, with gender as the primary stratification variable (Creswell, 2014).

### Data collection method

A structured, self-administered questionnaire was used to assess students' motivations for academic programme selection. Grounded in SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and EVT (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002), the instrument examined individual agency, perceived value and contextual influences. Items were adapted from validated scales to ensure cultural and linguistic relevance. Key constructs included intellectual curiosity, academic fit, financial expectations, job prospects, parental and peer influence, social prestige and institutional reputation (Ma et al., 2021). Responses were captured on a 5-point Likert scale, supporting descriptive, inferential and factor analyses. Content validity was ensured through expert review and a pilot test with eight students. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, with confidentiality safeguards to reduce bias. The final dataset enabled robust analysis of motivational patterns, demographics and programme choices, informing institutional strategies on guidance, gender equity and development.

### Data analysis

Quantitative data from 159 respondents were analysed by using IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 27.0 (IBM Corp, 2021). The analysis included exploratory factor analysis, reliability testing, Pearson correlation and independent samples *t*-tests to examine motivational dimensions and gender-based differences in programme selection.

Factor analysis was conducted by using principal component extraction with Varimax rotation to identify latent constructs. Factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0 and item loadings of  $\geq 0.40$  were retained. Reliability was assessed by using Cronbach's alpha, with  $\alpha \geq 0.70$  considered acceptable (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). For example, the career-oriented motivation factor comprising job prospects, financial expectations and career planning yielded  $\alpha = 0.82$ .

Pearson correlations explored relationships between motivational factors and programme choices, accounting for gender and socioeconomic background. Independent samples *t*-tests assessed gender differences across seven motivational constructs. Chi-square analysis examined associations between gender and programme choice. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations and frequencies) were used to summarise demographic variables and item-level responses, supporting subgroup comparisons

and contextual interpretation. These methodological choices were selected to align with the study's objectives and ensure validity, consistent with established standards in educational research (Field, 2018; Hair et al., 2022).

### Limitations

While the study offers valuable insights into gender-based enrolment motivations, several limitations affect its generalisability. The sample size of 159, although adequate for exploratory analysis, limits statistical power and broader representation (Turhan, 2020). Reliance on self-reported data introduces potential biases, including social desirability and subjective interpretation (Roeygens, 2023; Schunk et al., 2008), common in motivation research in which internal states are difficult to measure objectively. The study focused solely on B. Com and economics students at one institution, excluding other disciplines and geographic contexts. While necessary for feasibility, this limits transferability to wider academic settings (Coker, 2022).

### Future research

Despite these constraints, the study provides a strong foundation for future research using larger samples, multi-institutional comparisons and longitudinal designs to track motivational shifts over time. Future studies could also incorporate mixed-method approaches to enrich quantitative findings with contextual insights (Sammons & Davis, 2017) and explore intersectional factors such as socioeconomic status or cultural expectations that may shape gendered enrolment decisions (Unterhalter et al., 2020). Such expansions would enhance both the depth and the applicability of motivational research across diverse academic and cultural settings.

### Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Faculty of Health Sciences Ethics Review Board at the NUL (Ref. No. NUL/STA/2025/02). Participation was voluntary and anonymous.

## Results

### Demographic and academic profile of respondents

Table 1 presents a summary of key demographic and academic variables, including sex, age group and programme enrolment to contextualise the study sample.

Table 1 presents the demographic and academic profiles of participants. The sample shows a gender imbalance (64.2% women, 35.8% men), possibly reflecting institutional enrolment patterns. Most respondents (74.2%) are aged 18–23 years, consistent with typical undergraduate cohorts, while mature-age students (24+) represent only 8.8%. Programme-wise, 61% are enrolled in B. Com and 39% in economics, suggesting a preference or institutional emphasis on the B. Com stream.

**TABLE 1:** Demographic and academic characteristics of the sample ( $N = 159$ ).

Variable	Category	Frequency ( <i>n</i> )	%
Gender	Male	57	35.8
	Female	102	64.2
	Total	159	100.0
Age (years)	> 18	27	17.0
	18–23	118	74.2
	24–29	12	7.5
	30–35	2	1.3
	Total	159	100.0
Programme	B. Com	97	61.0
	Economics	62	39.0
	Total	159	100.0

B. Com, Bachelor of Commerce.

## Factor analysis

Table 2 summarises the exploratory factor analysis results, including factor loadings, eigenvalues and explained variance, supporting construct validity and interpretation of motivational dimensions.

Exploratory factor analysis identified seven motivational dimensions, ranging from institutional support to prestige, accounting for 54.1% of the total variance. These findings underscore a multifaceted decision-making process shaped by academic, social and personal factors, offering a foundation for gender-based analysis and strategic institutional alignment.

## Reliability analysis

Table 3 presents the Cronbach's alpha values for each motivational factor, indicating the internal consistency of the constructs identified.

Reliability analysis confirmed strong internal consistency for Institutional Support, Academic Simplicity, Career Utility and Social Endorsement ( $\alpha > 0.70$ ), supporting their statistical and conceptual validity in explaining programme selection. In contrast, programme popularity, Intrinsic Interest and Prestige showed weaker reliability ( $\alpha < 0.70$ ), indicating potential issues with item clarity or construct definition. While core factors are dependable, less stable dimensions require refinement to improve measurement and theoretical alignment in future research.

## Gender differences in motivational dimensions

Table 4 summarises the mean scores and standard deviations for each motivational factor, highlighting their relative prominence in students' programme selection.

Table 4 shows minimal gender differences across most motivational factors, with no significant variation ( $p > 0.05$ ) in institutional support, academic simplicity, career utility, social endorsement, programme popularity and prestige. This observation suggests broadly similar motivational orientations between male and female students. However, a significant difference was found for Intrinsic Interest and Future Relevance ( $p = 0.016$ ), with male students reporting

higher mean scores. This finding implies that men may prioritise personal engagement and long-term utility more strongly. The findings highlight the value of gender-sensitive advising, particularly strategies that enhance programme relevance and engagement for female students. Building on these motivational findings, this study examined the association between gender and programme choice, using a chi-square test of independence (Table 5).

## Gender differences in programme choice

Table 5 presents the chi-square test results assessing the association between gender and programme selection. The analysis explores whether male and female students differ significantly in their enrolment patterns for the Bachelor of Commerce and Economics programme.

The chi-square test revealed no statistically significant association between gender and programme choice ( $\chi^2[1, N = 200] = 0.884, p = 0.347$ ;  $\chi^2[1, N = 200] = 0.884, p = 0.347$ ), indicating a comparable distribution of male and female students across the Bachelor of Commerce and Economics programmes. Although female students accounted for a larger proportion of enrolment, this difference was not statistically significant. These results suggest that gender does not exert a decisive influence on programme selection, underscoring the importance of examining individual motivational factors rather than relying on gender-based assumptions.

## Gendered motivational profiles

This study offers a nuanced perspective on gender dynamics in motivational orientations and programme selection within the Faculty of Social Sciences at NUL. While most motivational constructs showed no statistically significant gender differences, Intrinsic Interest and Future Utility emerged as exceptions, with male students reporting significantly higher scores. This result indicates that motivations linked to personal enjoyment, intellectual engagement and long-term career relevance may resonate more strongly with male students.

These findings partially align with Naz et al. (2020), who observed that male students often prioritise extrinsic outcomes such as career advancement and societal recognition, whereas female students are more influenced by relational and intrinsic goals. Watt and Eccles (2008) and Stolk et al. (2021) similarly argue that gendered motivational schemas persist: men tend to associate academic choices with prestige and achievement, while women emphasise personal meaning and social contribution.

In contrast, Turhan's (2020) meta-analysis reported minimal gender differences across motivational sub-dimensions, underscoring the importance of situating motivational patterns within specific institutional and cultural contexts, including historical perspectives from Lesotho's higher education landscape (Ntimo-Makara, 2007).

**TABLE 2:** Rotated factor loadings for motivational dimensions (principal component analysis, Varimax rotation).

Rotated component matrix†	Component						
	Institutional and instructional support	Academic simplicity and efficiency	Career and economic utility	Social endorsement and influence	Programme popularity and peer affiliation	Intrinsic interest and future relevance	Prestige and personal development
If students are provided with course outlines	0.81	-	-	-	-	-	-
If lecturers are approachable	0.77	-	-	-	-	-	-
If the lecturer knows the content	0.72	-	-	-	-	-	-
If the university provides information to make a decision	0.60	-	-	-	-	-	-
If the major takes place at an appropriate time	0.60	-	-	-	-	-	-
If the amount of homework is appropriate	0.60	-	-	-	-	-	-
If the major's physical environment is good	0.58	-	-	-	-	-	-
If the major's instructor is good at teaching	0.57	-	-	-	-	-	-
If it allows people to interact	0.57	-	-	-	-	-	-
If many people have not done it	0.53	-	-	-	-	-	-
If there is less memorising	-	0.72	-	-	-	-	-
If the major is easy	-	0.71	-	-	-	-	-
If there is less writing	-	0.69	-	-	-	-	-
If it does not take long to finish my degree with the major	-	0.63	-	-	-	-	-
If it is easy to get credits	-	0.61	-	-	-	-	-
If it is easy to get a good grade	-	0.60	-	-	-	-	-
If it will satisfy my material	-	-	0.74	-	-	-	-
If it allows students to make lots of money upon completion	-	-	0.69	-	-	-	-
If one major has a clear goal	-	-	0.68	-	-	-	-
If the major adds value to my career	-	-	0.58	-	-	-	-
If it adds value to the country	-	-	0.53	-	-	-	-
If senior students recommend the major	-	-	-	0.83	-	-	-
If friends recommend the major	-	-	-	0.74	-	-	-
If lecturers recommend the major	-	-	-	0.69	-	-	-
If the major is recommended by my parents	-	-	-	0.56	-	-	-
If many students are doing it	-	-	-	-	0.72	-	-
If many people have done it	-	-	-	-	0.60	-	-
If friends take the major	-	-	-	-	0.51	-	-
If the major is interesting	-	-	-	-	-	0.65	-
If the major is useful in one's future career	-	-	-	-	-	0.63	-
If the difficulty level of the major is appropriate	-	-	-	-	-	0.55	-
If the major is fun	-	-	-	-	-	0.50	-
If the major is recommended by the government	-	-	-	-	-	0.46	-
If the major is socially prestigious	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.59
If one can acquire knowledge and improve competency	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.53
Eigenvalues	7.86	3.61	2.71	2.50	2.05	1.91	1.68
% of variance	18.72	8.60	6.45	5.95	4.87	4.54	4.01

Note: Extraction method: principal component analysis; rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser normalisation. Factor loadings  $\geq 0.40$  are reported. Extraction method: Principal component analysis. Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser normalisation. Rotation converged in 19 iterations.

†, Rotation converged in 19 iterations.

**TABLE 3:** Reliability analysis.

Factors	Number of items	Cronbach alpha
Institutional and instructional support	10	0.84
Academic simplicity and efficiency	6	0.78
Career and economic utility	5	0.71
Social endorsement and influence	4	0.77
Programme popularity and peer affiliation	3	0.67
Intrinsic interest and future relevance	5	0.52
Prestige and personal development	2	0.44

Note: Reliability was assessed by using Cronbach's alpha. Values  $\geq 0.70$  indicate acceptable internal consistency (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Although chi-square analysis revealed no statistically significant association between gender and programme choice, the observed motivational differences, particularly in intrinsic interest, suggest that gendered patterns may still influence how students engage with academic pathways. This suggestion supports the EVT (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002), which highlights the role of subjective task values, such as

attainment and utility, in academic decision-making and their variation across gender lines.

## Discussion

### Regional context and comparative insights

The study's findings resonate with Southern African literature on educational decision-making. Blake and Mestry (2021) highlight how parental income, education and language shape school choice in Gauteng, reflecting the socioeconomic drivers behind strategic academic engagement, paralleling our findings on career utility and instructional quality. Similarly, Mhlongo and O'Neill (2013) emphasise the role of family expectations and emotional support in programme selection at University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), reinforcing the influence of social endorsement and peer affiliation identified in our

**TABLE 4:** Gender differences in motivational dimensions (independent samples *t*-test).

Factors	Male		Female		<i>t</i> -test for equality of means		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	<i>d</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Institutional and instructional support	3.49	0.85	3.47	0.91	0.02	0.16	0.900
Academic simplicity and efficiency	2.92	1.01	3.16	0.96	-0.21	-1.20	0.233
Career and economic utility	4.50	0.69	4.37	0.73	0.12	1.01	0.316
Social endorsement and influence	2.27	0.98	2.17	0.91	0.10	0.63	0.530
Programme popularity and peer affiliation	2.63	0.76	2.72	0.86	-0.08	-0.62	0.537
Intrinsic interest and future relevance	4.02	0.62	3.74	0.70	0.27	2.45	0.016
Prestige and personal development	4.10	0.69	3.88	0.94	0.22	1.61	0.110

Note:  $p < 0.05$  indicates statistical significance.  
SD, standard deviation.

**TABLE 5:** Gender distribution of respondents by programme choice (chi-square test results).

Programme registered for	Gender of the respondent		Total
	Male	Female	
B. Com	33.0	67.0	100
Economics	40.3	59.7	100

Note: A chi-square test of independence was conducted to examine the association between gender and programme choice. The test was not statistically significant,  $\chi^2(1, N = 200) = 0.884, p = 0.347$ , indicating no significant association. Chi-square = 0.884;  $p$ -value = 0.347

factor analysis. Further, Singaram and Sommerville (2018) demonstrate that race, language and financial support affect academic performance and motivation, echoing the observation that intrinsic interest and future relevance, particularly among male students, are shaped by broader demographic contexts. These regional insights affirm that motivational constructs are not isolated psychological traits but are embedded within structural and relational environments (Howard et al., 2020).

### Implications for advising and institutional strategy

While overt gender disparities in programme selection appear to be narrowing, subtle motivational differences persist, with implications for advising and institutional strategy. Gender-sensitive counselling and tailored support that reflect diverse motivational profiles can enhance student engagement, improve programme fit and promote equity (Bustamante-Mora et al., 2024). Institutions should consider integrating motivational profiling into early advising to align guidance with students' values and goals. Marketing efforts should highlight varied motivational drivers, such as career relevance, instructional quality and peer influence, to reach a broader and more diverse student audience. Institutional planning should also align with Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4 and SDG 5), reinforcing inclusive, aspiration-driven programme selection and advancing transformative education (UNICEF, 2021).

### Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the following strategies are proposed to enhance programme selection support and address motivational disparities within the Faculty of Social Sciences:

- **Strengthen career guidance systems:** Implement structured, early-stage advising that integrates motivational profiling and labour market insights to support informed programme selection and reduce academic misalignment (Blake & Mestry, 2021).

- **Promote gender-sensitive advising:** Tailor academic counselling to address gendered motivational differences and challenge disciplinary stereotypes, expanding students' perceived academic and career options (Stolk et al., 2021).
- **Align programmes with industry needs:** Periodically review curricula to ensure responsiveness to labour market demands and national development priorities, enhancing programme relevance and utility (Turhan, 2020).
- **Support sustainable development goals integration in institutional planning:** Align programme development and student support strategies with SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality) to promote inclusive and transformative education (UNESCO, 2022).

## Conclusion

This study reveals that while enrolment gaps may be narrowing, gendered motivational profiles, especially among male students, continue to shape academic decision-making. The findings affirm EVT, highlighting how career utility and intrinsic interest influence programme engagement. To foster meaningful alignment between access and motivation, institutions must strengthen advising and promote inclusive programme messaging. By addressing these dynamics, the study contributes to SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality) through evidence-based strategies that support equitable, aspiration-driven academic pathways.

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The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

### CRedit authorship contribution

Regina M. Thetsane: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology,

Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualisation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Motselisi C. Mokhethi: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualisation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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## Data availability

Data supporting this research are available on request from the corresponding author. Public access is restricted to safeguard participant privacy.

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