

## Research Article

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## Factors Determining Academic Pathway Changes among University Students at Sultan Qaboos University, Oman

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**Abstract**

**Background/purpose.** Shifts in academic pathways among higher education students have become a critical issue in Oman, raising concerns for both students and institutions. Such shifts are influenced by multiple psychosocial, academic, and institutional factors, resulting in potential educational, psychological, and social costs. The purpose of this study is to identify the primary factors affecting students' decisions to change their academic tracks at Sultan Qaboos University.

**Materials/methods.** A quantitative cross-sectional survey design was employed. The sample study consisted of 59 students from the College of Arts and Social Sciences who had previously changed their academic tracks. Data were collected using the Academic Pathway Shift Factors Questionnaire (APSFQ), which included five dimensions: university environment, academic factors, personal factors, professional and social factors, and health-related factors. Ordinal logistic regression (OLR) was applied to analyze the predictive power of these factors.

**Results.** Findings revealed that the university environment and academic factors were the strongest predictors of students' motivation to change their academic track, with odds ratios of 1.122 and 1.093, respectively. Personal factors (OR = 1.074) and professional/social factors (OR = 1.075) also made significant contributions. In contrast, health-related factors showed no significant effect. The model demonstrated high explanatory power (Nagelkerke  $R^2 = 0.656$ ).

**Conclusion.** The study concludes that institutional and academic factors are the most influential in students' academic mobility, followed by personal and social considerations. These results underscore the importance of strengthening academic advising systems, enhancing student support services, and aligning admission policies with students' interests. Limitations of the study include a relatively small sample size and a focus on a single institution, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Policy implications highlight the role of proactive advising strategies, targeted institutional reforms, and integrated support mechanisms to reduce academic attrition and better align higher education outcomes with Oman's Vision 2040.



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## 1. Introduction

The transition from school to university marks a critical transformation in a student's life journey. It involves moving away from the protective environment of family and community into a broader and more demanding setting, where individual responsibilities and academic tasks increase substantially. This requires adapting to this new life, including the changes in their social, educational, and economic lifestyle. As a result of this change, students are exposed to a set of pressures and influences that prevent them from achieving a satisfactory result in their chosen academic specialization. Perhaps the most prominent of these influences is the lack of linguistic proficiency in colleges that rely on foreign languages, the difficulty of some specializations that require greater focus and diligence, in addition to the problems of external housing and bad companions, which ultimately leads to poor academic performance and academic probation, which ultimately leads the student to one of two paths: either terminating their enrolment or changing their academic path. (Ibrahim, 2023; Ibrahim, 2024)

Universities work to achieve their mission by helping students grow and develop in various fields in line with their needs and abilities. To achieve this, universities employ all the capabilities that help students develop their academic abilities and enhance their academic achievement. This is achieved by creating an attractive learning environment within university life, harnessing and directing their abilities in the right direction, and providing all means of support to achieve academic success. This also includes planning to address all obstacles that may be encountered within the university environment. Among these challenges that universities deal with is the phenomenon of changing academic paths. (Al-Shahrani, 2016, 96)

While it's true that the student's Academic pathway shifts from one college to another may be beneficial at times, it can also represent a form of educational waste. A student spending a year or more at one college and then transferring to another after that period is considered a form of educational waste that requires careful attention and avoidance, especially if it entails academic, psychological, family, and social costs.

Academic pathway shifts among higher education students have become a growing topic in the educational and social sciences due to their implications for student retention, academic performance, and institutional effectiveness.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Psychological Factors

This phenomenon, often referred to as academic mobility or major change, encompasses a wide range of student behaviors, from program transfer to recurrent major switching that can delay university completion. Therefore, understanding these core factors is essential since inter-program mobility involves not only broader social, psychological, and institutional influences but also a personal academic decision. A number of studies have examined the different reasons for academic shifts among students in higher education.

Xu (2024) and Kang et al. (2024) noted that academic self-efficacy is an important psychological factor related to academic pathway switching; therefore, students with low confidence in their field of study are more likely to consider changing their academic tracks. In addition, the complexity of the relationship between self-efficacy and track stability increases when it intersects with students' career choice capacity. Van Praagt et al. (2024) highlighted that alignment between students' interests and academic areas of study is a significant psychological factor in sustaining academic stability. Research indicates that students whose interests are closely consistent with their chosen fields of study show higher levels of academic engagement, satisfaction, and persistence.

Ertl and Hartmann (2022) also observed that interest-major congruence functions as a key element that positively influences academic achievement, educational commitment, and overall academic performance; however, the absence of these factors frequently manifests as lower academic performance. Jin et al. (2024) mentioned that early identification and matching of students' interests with their academic selections help to prevent misalignment.

## **2.2. Social Factors**

The social environment, including family expectations, socioeconomic status, and cultural capital, significantly affects students' academic pathway decisions. A study by Zhang et al. (2023) noted that family expectations and socio-economic circumstances played a substantial role, particularly in cultures that emphasize group harmony.

Kim et al. (2024) and Dockery (2022) studied Parental educational expectations and career aspirations that frequently intersect and found that students' personal interests are often overshadowed by parents' hopes for their children, leading to the potential for Future academic conflicts that may arise when students' changing preferences clash with those of their families.

Ricks and Warren figured out that additional reasons influencing academic change are the Challenges specifically experienced by first-time students enrolling in university settings. The lack of cultural knowledge resulted in confusion about academic procedures; students' susceptibility to changing their field of study increases with anxiety and skill deficits. Recent research recognizes that academic pathway mobility is a complex phenomenon with heterogeneous outcomes, rather than uniformly problematic behavior. Studies indicate that male and female students respond differently to early academic challenges in university settings; women are more likely to change their majors, while men prefer to change their academic field completely (Barua & Lockee, 2024).

## **2.3. Institutional Factors**

The academic pathway shifts may sometimes represent adaptive, rather than maladaptive, responses to early academic challenges. In addition, Institutional characteristics are linked to academic pathway shifts and their considerable influence on students' academic stability. The quality and accessibility of Consistent academic progress depend heavily on the availability of academic support services. Academic advising plays a significant role in improving academic stability; furthermore, improving learning outcomes is also facilitated by Hawthorne (2022) and Mathew & Ibrahim (2023). Loes et al. (2024) observed that academic stability resulted from Positive interaction between academic staff and students, and student satisfaction played a crucial role in this connection. Moreover, Mattanah et al. (2024) recommended that a strong relationship between university staff and students increases academic stability, leads to student engagement, encourages distance learning approaches, and decreases reliance on shallow learning strategies. Academic program characteristics have a significant impact on the stability of students' academic journey. Eldiasty and Helal (2018) highlighted the significant role of spiritual intelligence in shaping students' adaptation to college life. Their study among social work students at Helwan University found a strong correlation between levels of spiritual intelligence and students' ability to cope with academic and social challenges, underscoring the importance of psychological and spiritual dimensions in educational adjustment processes. Moreover, Xing et al. (2022) found that pivotal factors contributing to stable learning environments include increasing faculty access, reducing class sizes, and the availability of academic advising opportunities. Therefore, Small student groups enable instructors to provide feedback and boost stronger academic bonds, by promoting academic engagement and mitigating academic disconnection. Insufficient and unreliable educational support, especially during a student's first academic year, can lead to uncertainty in identifying their academic directions. However, when institutional support proves insufficient or inconsistent, particularly during students' early academic years, the consequences often include increased pathway instability

and heightened uncertainty about academic direction. A longitudinal examination by Liu, Mishra, and Kopko (2021) of community college students revealed that while major changes are relatively frequent, their impact on academic success varies significantly depending on the strength of institutional support systems and the timing of transitions. Their research underscores the critical role of institutional frameworks in either enabling students to navigate academic pathways successfully or exposing them to systemic barriers that exacerbate instability.

### Research Gap and Contribution

Despite the growing body of literature, most studies on academic pathway shifts have been conducted in Western contexts, with limited empirical evidence from Gulf and Arab universities. This creates a gap in understanding how cultural, social, and institutional dynamics shape academic mobility in Oman. The current study addresses this gap by examining psychosocial, institutional, and professional factors influencing students' pathway shifts at Sultan Qaboos University.

### Unique Contribution

The study contributes a context-specific analysis by integrating psychological, social, health-related, and institutional dimensions in a non-Western higher education setting. It advances scholarly knowledge and offers practical implications for academic advising and policy development in Oman and the Gulf.

### Research Questions

To address the objectives of the study, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What are the main psychosocial, institutional, and academic factors influencing students' decisions to change their academic pathways at Sultan Qaboos University?
2. To what extent do personal, social, and health-related considerations contribute to academic pathway shifts?
3. Which institutional and policy measures could help reduce the negative impacts of academic mobility and support student retention in line with Oman's Vision 2040?

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Sample

The sample of the current study consisted of 59 university students from Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) who had transferred to the College of Arts and Social Sciences from other colleges within the university. Females comprised the majority of the sample (69.5%), while males represented 30.5%. The participants' ages ranged from under 20 to 24 years and above, with the majority between 20 and 22 years (66.1%), followed by under 20 (16.9%), 22 to 24 years (13.6%), and a small portion 24 years or older (3.4%).

Academic performance, measured by GPA, indicated that 52.5% of the participants had GPAs between 2.00 and 2.99, 45.8% between 3.00 and 4.00, and only 1.7% between 1.00 and 1.99. Students represented diverse geographic regions of Oman, including Al Dakhiliyah (25.4%), Muscat (16.9%), North Al Sharqiyah (13.6%), North Al Batinah (11.9%), Dhofar and South Al Batinah (each 10.2%), Al Dhahirah (6.8%), and Al Buraimi (5.1%). Regarding socioeconomic background, 50.8% of students reported monthly household incomes of OMR 1,000 or more, 23.7% between OMR 700 and less than 1,000, 22.0% between OMR 300 and less than 700, and only 3.4% below OMR 300.

Patterns of academic mobility revealed that 57.6% of students were currently enrolled in the College of Arts and Social Sciences, 13.6% in the College of Science, and 11.9% in the College of Education, while prior transfers frequently originated from the College of Arts and Social Sciences

(37.3%) and the College of Agricultural and Marine Sciences (23.7%). Additionally, admission preference data indicated that a large proportion of students (44.1%) were initially placed in programs ranked fourth or lower in their original choices, suggesting potential misalignment between their initial academic preferences and their eventual program placements.

It is important to acknowledge certain limitations of the study design. The sample consisted of 59 students drawn exclusively from the College of Arts and Social Sciences at Sultan Qaboos University. While this provides valuable insights into academic pathway shifts within this institutional context, the relatively small sample size and the reliance on data from a single institution may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Therefore, caution should be exercised when attempting to extend these results to other universities or broader populations.

### **3.2. Procedure**

Data for the present study were collected from a sample of students in the College of Arts and Social Sciences at Sultan Qaboos University who had transferred from other colleges within the university. A Google Forms survey link was distributed to the targeted students based on an Excel list of all individuals who had previously transferred to the College of Arts and Social Sciences.

The questionnaire was developed through a structured process: first, items were generated from prior literature on academic mobility and institutional advising reports; second, the content of the factors and associated items was reviewed by faculty members from the College of Arts and Social Sciences to ensure clarity, contextual relevance, and alignment with the study objectives. Based on this process, the final instrument consisted of 52 items divided across five domains (UN = 10 items; ACF = 12 items; PRF = 10 items; PSF = 11 items; HLF = 9 items). To provide an overview, Table 1 presents two illustrative items from each domain, while the complete list of all 52 items is available in Appendix A.

The questionnaire was administered during scheduled class hours under the supervision of the researchers to prevent duplication and ensure independent responses. It required approximately 8–10 minutes to complete. The questionnaire was distributed to students in Arabic, which is their primary language of instruction. For reporting and publication purposes, the items were translated into English by the authors.

Prior to data collection, official approval was obtained from the College of Arts and Social Sciences. Students were invited to complete the survey during regular class hours, and participation was entirely voluntary. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before they began the survey. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, responses were collected without any identifying information and were not linked to academic grades. All students who attended the data collection session agreed to participate, and their voluntary consent was documented prior to participation. All responses were complete, with no missing data detected; therefore, no imputation procedures were necessary.

**Table 1.** Sample items from each APSFQ factor

Factor	Sample Items
<b>University Environment (UN)</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The learning environment lacks proper conditions, such as ventilation and lighting.</li> <li>2. The general atmosphere makes me feel isolated and disconnected from others.</li> </ol>
<b>Academic Factors (ACF)</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The course load is too heavy and overwhelming.</li> <li>2. Professors do not provide constructive feedback.</li> </ol>
<b>Personal Factors (PRF)</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. My current major does not align with my ambitions.</li> <li>2. I lost motivation due to depression or frustration.</li> </ol>
<b>Professional and Social Factors (PSF)</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. There are not enough job opportunities in this major.</li> <li>2. Society doesn't value or respect this specialization.</li> </ol>
<b>Health-Related Factors (HLF)</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I suffer from health problems that have affected my ability to continue studying in my previous major.</li> <li>2. The academic pressure in my previous major negatively affected my sleep and physical health.</li> </ol>

### **3.3. Measure**

The study employed the Academic Pathway Shift Factors Questionnaire (APSFQ), developed to assess students' perceptions of the factors influencing their decisions to transfer from other colleges to the College of Arts and Social Sciences at Sultan Qaboos University. The instrument comprised five positively worded subscales, each representing a distinct set of predictors: university environment, academic factors, personal factors, professional and social factors, and health-related factors.

Responses were collected using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = "Applies to a small extent" to 5 = "Applies to a very large extent", to capture the intensity of students' experiences and perceptions that may have contributed to their academic transition decisions. For analysis, scores were computed in two ways: (a) domain scores were obtained by summing the responses within each subscale to represent the influence of that specific factor, and (b) an overall composite mean score was calculated across all items to reflect the combined influence of the five predictor dimensions. The composite mean score was subsequently categorized into four ordinal levels of motivation (low, moderate, high, very high) for use in the ordinal logistic regression model.

### **3.4. Design**

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional survey design to investigate the factors influencing academic pathway shifts among students. Data were collected using an electronic questionnaire (Google Form), which was distributed to a sample of 59 students who had transferred to the College of Arts and Social Sciences at Sultan Qaboos University from other colleges within the university. The survey design allowed for the efficient collection of standardized responses, enabling the analysis of students' perceptions across multiple predictor dimensions within a single point in time. The design was complemented by rigorous statistical modeling—ordinal logistic regression—to account for the ordinal nature of the dependent variable, thereby enhancing the validity of inferences drawn from the data.

### **3.5. Statistical modeling approach: ordinal logistic regression**

This study employed ordinal logistic regression (OLR) to examine the relationship between undergraduate students' motivation to change academic paths and five key factors: university environment, academic challenges, personal reasons, professional and social influences, and health-related conditions. OLR is appropriate when the dependent variable is ordinal, as it allows modeling ordered outcomes based on multiple predictors while preserving the ordinal nature of the response variable (Agresti, 2010; Williams, 2016). This method was selected over linear regression because the dependent variable was categorical with a natural ordering (low to very high motivation), and over multinomial regression because OLR preserves that ordering, thereby producing more efficient and interpretable estimates (Abdalla, 2025).

According to this statistical modeling approach, the study followed a series of analytical steps:

First, the dependent variable (motivation to change academic pathway) was computed as a composite mean score across all relevant items and then categorized into four ordered levels (low, moderate, high, very high), ensuring both theoretical relevance and statistical interpretability.

Second, the five independent variables were entered into the model as continuous predictors, based on summed scores for each dimension, after confirming that no severe multicollinearity was present (VIF values < 5).

Third, the proportional odds (parallel lines) assumption was formally tested to ensure that the relationship between each predictor and the dependent variable was consistent across thresholds; this assumption was met, validating the use of OLR.

Fourth, regression coefficients ( $\beta$ ) were estimated and exponentiated to produce odds ratios (OR), which were interpreted as the likelihood of being in a higher category of motivation to change per unit increase in each predictor, holding all other predictors constant. The Wald chi-square test was applied to evaluate the statistical significance of each predictor.

Finally, overall model adequacy was assessed through model fitting indices and pseudo R-square statistics (Cox and Snell, Nagelkerke, McFadden). These indices provided evidence of the model's explanatory power, complementing the statistical significance of individual predictors. Model diagnostics, including residual analysis and goodness-of-fit tests, were examined to confirm the robustness and reliability of the findings.

#### **Dependent and independent variables**

The dependent variable: motivation to change academic path

The dependent variable (DV) in this study represents undergraduate students' motivation to change academic paths. To measure this response variable, a composite score was derived based on students' responses to all Likert-scale items that reflect various influencing factors (predictors). Each item was rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = "Applies to a small extent" to 5 = "Applies to a very large extent". This scale captures the intensity of experiences or perceptions that may have contributed to their academic transition decision. The resulting continuous composite scores were converted into a total score (by averaging across all items), and then four ordinal categories were created (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Categorization of motivation levels based on composite mean scores

Mean score range	Ordinal category	Description
1.00 – 2.00	1	Low motivation to change
2.01 – 3.00	2	Moderate motivation
3.01 – 4.00	3	High motivation
4.01 – 5.00	4	Very high motivation

The independent variables: influencing dimensions

In this study, five independent variables were constructed by computing dimension scores (summed values of relevant items) for the major thematic areas identified in the questionnaire. Each dimension reflects a specific set of potential causes or pressures for changing academic paths. Table 3 provides a description of each independent variable.

**Table 3.** Independent variable dimensions and descriptions

Variables	Description
<b>University environment</b>	Captures the perceived conduciveness of the academic and physical learning environment (e.g., classroom conditions, campus facilities, student support services).
<b>Academic factors</b>	Reflects challenges related to course content, instructional quality, and assessment practices.
<b>Personal factors</b>	Represents internal motivations, personal interests, and mental health considerations.
<b>Professional and social factors</b>	Encompasses societal pressures, future career prospects, and labor market perceptions.
<b>Health-related factors</b>	Assesses whether students' physical or psychological health conditions affected their ability to continue in their original major.

## 4. Results

### **4.1. Demographic characteristics of the respondents**

The study sample consisted of 59 respondents, with females comprising the majority (69.5%) and males representing 30.5%.

#### **Age and academic performance**

Most participants were between 20 and 22 years old (66.1%), followed by those aged 22 to 24 years (13.6%) and under 20 years (16.9%), while only a small portion (3.4%) were 24 years or older. Academic performance, as measured by GPA, showed that 52.5% of participants had GPAs between 2.00 and 2.99, 45.8% between 3.00 and 4.00, and only 1.7% between 1.00 and 1.99.

#### **Geographic and socioeconomic background**

The sample included students from diverse governorates: Al Dakhiliyah (25.4%), Muscat (16.9%), North Al Sharqiyah (13.6%), North Al Batinah (11.9%), Dhofar and South Al Batinah (each 10.2%), Al Dhahirah (6.8%), and Al Buraimi (5.1%). Regarding average monthly household income, half of the respondents (50.8%) reported earnings of OMR 1,000 or more. In comparison, 23.7% earned

between OMR 700 and less than 1,000, 22.0% earned between OMR 300 and less than 700, and only 3.4% reported incomes below OMR 300.

### Academic mobility and college enrollment

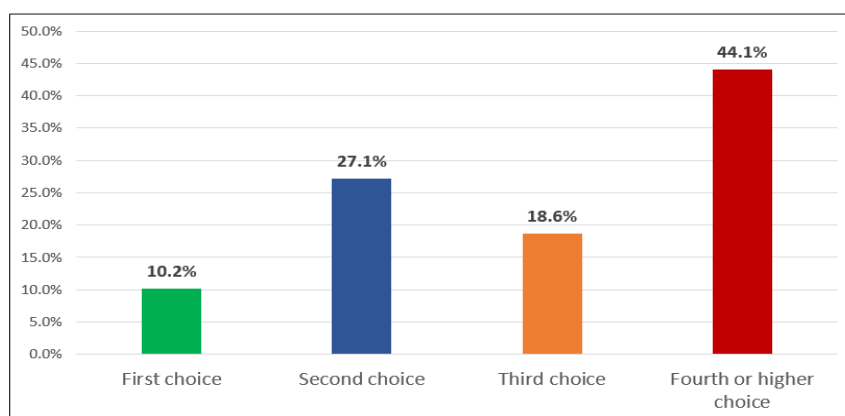
Table 4 presents the distribution of students by current college enrollment and previously transferred college, providing insight into students' academic mobility patterns. The majority of respondents were currently enrolled in the College of Arts & Social Sciences (57.6%), followed by the College of Science (13.6%) and the College of Education (11.9%). Regarding prior transfers, a significant portion (37.3%) had transferred from the College of Arts & Social Sciences, and 23.7% from the College of Agricultural & Marine Sciences, indicating notable transitions from science- and humanities-related fields.

**Table 4.** Distribution of students by current college and previously transferred college

College	Current college		Transferred from	
	N	%	N	%
College of Medicine & Health Sciences	3	5.1%	0	-
College of Nursing	1	1.7%	1	1.7%
College of Law	1	1.7%	2	3.4%
College of Engineering	1	1.7%	3	5.1%
College of Science	8	13.6%	4	6.8%
College of Education	7	11.9%	2	3.4%
College of Arts & Social Sciences	34	57.6%	22	37.3%
College of Economics & Political Science	4	6.8%	11	18.6%
College of Agricultural & Marine Sciences	0	-	14	23.7%

### Admission preferences

Figure 1 presents a descriptive analysis of students' admission preferences. A notable 44.1% of students reported being placed in a program that ranked fourth or lower in their original preferences. This was followed by 18.6% who enrolled in their third choice, 27.1% in their second choice, and only 10.2% who were admitted to their first-choice program. This indicates that a majority of students were assigned to lower-priority choices, reflecting a significant misalignment between their initial academic preferences and their eventual program placements.



**Figure 1.** Admission preferences of students during the general diploma stage

#### 4.2. Reliability and construct validity results

Table 5 presents the results of the reliability analysis for the measurement scales, showing high internal consistency across all dimensions based on Cronbach's alpha coefficients. Each of the five independent variable dimensions achieved alpha values well above the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70, indicating acceptable to excellent reliability (Taber, 2018). Notably, the academic factors dimension demonstrated the highest internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.957$ ), while all other dimensions also showed strong reliability. The overall scale, comprising all 52 items, achieved a Cronbach's alpha of 0.949, confirming the instrument's coherence and suitability for subsequent ordinal logistic regression. Furthermore, Table 6 confirms the construct validity of the measurement instrument, as evidenced by statistically significant and moderately to strongly positive Pearson correlation coefficients between each dimension and the total score (ranging from  $r = 0.441$  to  $r = 0.897$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), affirming that the constructs are conceptually and statistically aligned with the overall latent structure.

**Table 5.** Reliability statistics of the measurement scales

Dimension	Number of items	Cronbach's alpha
University environment (UN)	10	0.828
Academic factors (ACF)	12	0.957
Personal factors (PRF)	10	0.815
Professional and social factors (PSF)	11	0.821
Health-related factors (HLF)	9	0.872
Total Scale	52	0.949

**Table 6.** Pearson correlation coefficients for construct validity

Variable	UN	ACF	PRF	PSF	HLF	Total Score
UN	1	.779**	.169	.318*	.623**	.835**
ACF		1	.235	.243	.701**	.897**
PRF			1	-.008	.130	.441**
PSF				1	.219	.480**
HLF					1	.772**
Total						1

#### 4.3. Collinearity assessment

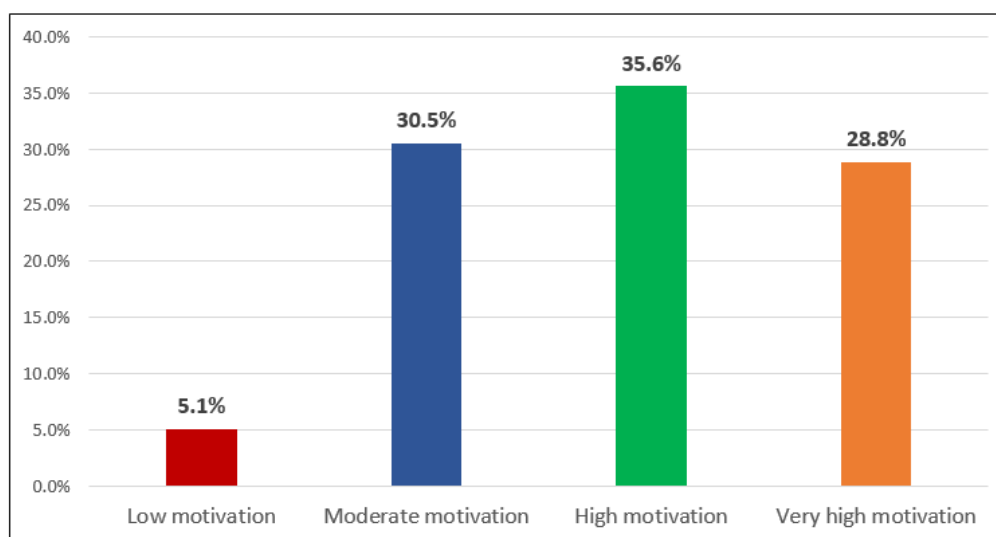
To examine the potential multicollinearity among the independent variables, collinearity statistics were analyzed using tolerance values and the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF). As shown in Table 7, all VIF values fall well below the commonly accepted threshold of 5.0 (Hair et al., 2019), indicating no serious multicollinearity issues among the predictors. Specifically, VIF values ranged from 1.066 (Personal factors) to 3.247 (Academic factors), and corresponding tolerance values ranged from 0.308 to 0.938, exceeding the minimum acceptable threshold of 0.10. These findings confirm that the five predictors—university environment, academic factors, personal reasons, professional and social influences, and health-related factors—are sufficiently independent to be included in the ordinal logistic regression model without distorting the estimates.

**Table 7.** Variance inflation factor (VIF) results for predictor variables

Predictor variable	VIF	Tolerance
University environment	2.729	0.366
Academic factors	3.247	0.308
Personal factors	1.066	0.938
Professional and social factors	1.118	0.894
Health-related factors	2.033	0.492

#### 4.4. Descriptive analysis results of the dependent variable

The dependent variable, representing students' level of motivation to change their academic track, was categorized into four levels: low, moderate, high, and very high motivation. As shown in Figure 2, the highest proportion of students reported high motivation (35.6%), followed by very high motivation (28.8%) and moderate motivation (30.5%). Only 5.1% of students indicated low motivation. This distribution indicates that the majority of participants expressed relatively high levels of motivation to switch their academic specialization, underscoring the relevance of examining potential influencing factors in subsequent analyses.

**Figure 2.** Student motivation levels to change academic track

#### 4.5. Descriptive analysis results of independent variables

To examine the distribution of student responses across the five independent variables influencing the motivation to change academic tracks, descriptive statistics including minimum, maximum, mean, standard deviation, and percentage mean scores were calculated. As shown in Table 8, personal factors exhibited the highest average score ( $M = 29.00$ ; 58.0%), indicating that personal considerations play a notable role in students' decision-making. This was followed by academic factors ( $M = 32.66$ ; 54.4%) and professional and social factors ( $M = 27.14$ ; 49.3%). In contrast, university environment and health-related factors recorded relatively lower mean percentages at 44.0% and 40.6%, respectively, suggesting these dimensions may exert less influence overall. These findings offer initial insight into the relative importance of each factor category prior to inferential analysis.

**Table 8.** Descriptive statistics of independent variables

Predictor variable	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Mean(%)	Std. Deviation
University environment	10	41	21.98	44.0%	8.161
Academic factors	12	60	32.66	54.4%	15.238
Personal factors	10	50	29.00	58.0%	9.830
Professional and social factors	12	55	27.14	49.3%	9.128
Health-related factors	9	38	18.27	40.6%	8.698

#### 4.6. Ordinal logistic regression analysis results

To determine the influence of the five predictor variables on students' motivation to change academic tracks, an ordinal logistic regression model was estimated. The dependent variable comprised four ordered categories (low, moderate, high, and very high motivation). The results are presented in Table 9, including odds ratios and 95% confidence intervals for ease of interpretation.

The results revealed that the university environment was a statistically significant predictor of students' motivation to change academic tracks. With an odds ratio of 1.122, this indicates that for every one-unit increase in perceived university environment support, the odds of students reporting higher motivation increase by approximately 12.2%. The 95% confidence interval for this predictor does not include the value of one, reinforcing the significance and reliability of this effect. Likewise, academic factors showed a statistically significant relationship with motivation. The odds ratio of 1.093 implies that a one-unit increase in academic factor scores is associated with a 9.3% increase in the odds of being more motivated to change academic tracks. The confidence interval for this estimate also excludes one, affirming the statistical robustness of the finding.

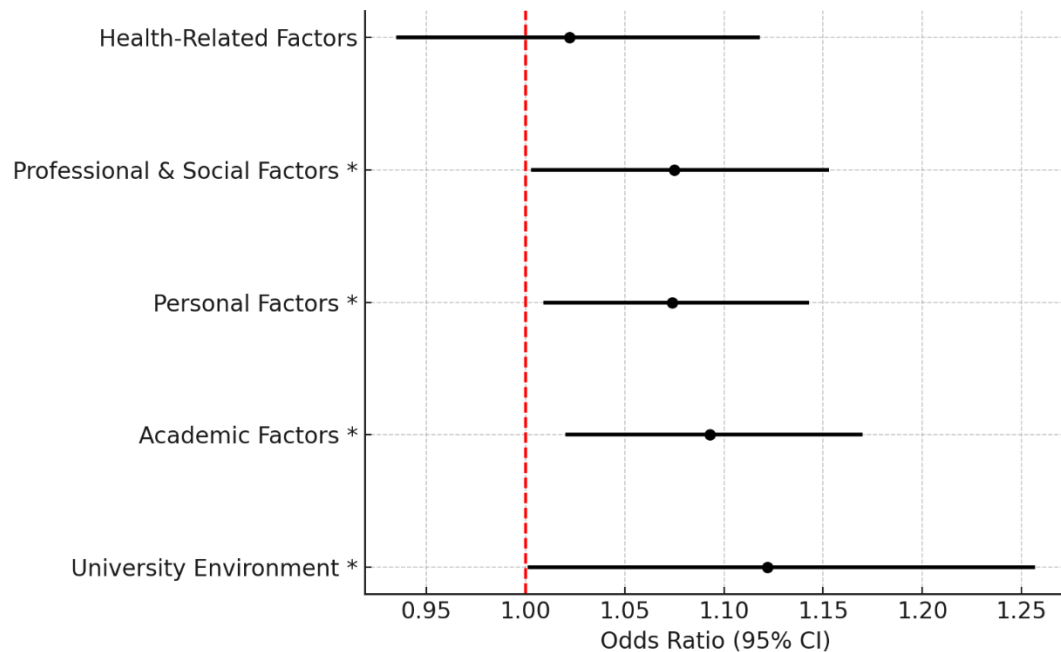
In addition, both personal factors and professional and social factors emerged as significant contributors to the model. The odds ratio for personal factors was 1.074, indicating that a 1-unit increase in personal considerations—such as personal interests or challenges—increases the odds of higher motivation by 7.4%. Similarly, the odds ratio for professional and social factors was 1.075, meaning that students who are more influenced by professional goals or social expectations are 7.5% more likely to report increased motivation to switch tracks.

In contrast, health-related factors were not statistically significant, with an odds ratio of 1.022 and a confidence interval that included 1. This indicates that variations in students' health-related concerns do not have a meaningful effect on their motivation to change academic paths within this model.

**Table 9.** Ordinal logistic regression results

Predictor Variable	Estimate ( $\beta$ )	Std. Error	Wald $\chi^2$	p-value	Odds ratio	95% CI for odds ratio)
UN	0.115	0.058	3.943	.047*	1.122	1.001-1.257
ACF	0.089	0.035	6.427	.011*	1.093	1.020-1.170
PRF	0.071	0.032	5.084	.024*	1.074	1.009-1.143
PSF	0.073	0.035	4.230	.040*	1.075	1.003-1.153
HLF	0.022	0.046	0.237	.627	1.022	0.935-1.118

Figure 3 illustrates the odds ratios and 95% confidence intervals for the five predictor dimensions included in the ordinal logistic regression model. Factors marked with an asterisk (\*) in the figure indicate statistically significant predictors ( $p < .05$ ). As shown, the university environment (OR = 1.122,  $p < .05$ ) and academic factors (OR = 1.093,  $p < .05$ ) were the strongest predictors of students' motivation to change their academic pathways. Personal factors (OR = 1.074,  $p < .05$ ) and professional/social factors (OR = 1.075,  $p < .05$ ) also demonstrated significant but comparatively smaller effects. In contrast, health-related factors (OR = 1.022, ns) were not statistically significant, as their confidence interval crossed the reference line of OR = 1. The figure provides a clear visual summary of each factor's relative contribution, complementing the detailed regression tables by highlighting the predictors with meaningful explanatory power.



**Figure 3.** Predictors of Students' Motivation to Change Academic Pathways: Odds Ratios with 95% Confidence Intervals

#### 4.7. Model fit and assumption testing

To assess the adequacy and validity of the ordinal logistic regression model, several diagnostic tests were performed (Table 9). The Model Fitting Information revealed a substantial improvement from the intercept-only model ( $-2$  Log Likelihood = 146.305) to the final model ( $-2$  Log Likelihood = 92.137), with a statistically significant chi-square value of 54.168 ( $df = 5$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This indicates that including predictor variables significantly improves model performance compared to the baseline model.

In terms of explanatory power, the Pseudo R-Square values indicate a strong model fit. Specifically, the Cox and Snell value of 0.601 suggests that approximately 60.1% of the variance in students' motivation to change academic tracks is explained by the model. The Nagelkerke value, a more adjusted estimate, was 0.656, indicating that 65.6% of the variation is accounted for. Similarly, the McFadden value of 0.370 reflects that 37.0% of the variance is explained, which is considered a respectable level in logistic regression models.

Finally, the Test of Parallel Lines was conducted to examine whether the proportional odds assumption holds. The non-significant chi-square value ( $\chi^2 = 2.361$ ,  $p = .993$ ) confirms that the slope coefficients are consistent across response categories, satisfying the assumption of parallel lines. This result validates the appropriateness of the ordinal logistic regression model and supports the reliability of the parameter estimates.

**Table 9.** Summary of model fit and assumptions

Test	Statistic	Value
<b>Model Fitting</b>	Chi-Square	54.168 (df=5, $p < .001$ )
<b>Pseudo R-Square</b>	Nagelkerke	.656
	Cox and Snell	.601
	McFadden	.370
<b>Parallel Lines Test</b>	Chi-Square	2.361 (df=10, $p = .993$ )

## 5. Discussion

The current study examined the psychological, social, university, academic, and health factors associated with changing academic tracks among a sample of students from the College of Arts and Social Sciences at Sultan Qaboos University. The results revealed that the university environment and academic factors were the strongest factors influencing students' motivation to change their academic tracks, followed by personal and professional/social factors. In contrast, health-related factors showed no significant influence. These findings are consistent with previous studies that emphasized the critical role of academic experiences and institutional support in shaping students' decisions regarding academic mobility (Xu, 2024; Kang et al., 2024).

In particular, the strong predictive power of academic factors supports the argument that academic mismatches, performance challenges, and program expectations serve as primary drivers of pathway shifts, consistent with Reardon et al.'s findings. (2015).

The study results also demonstrated the influence of personal and professional/social factors, such as individual motivations, career aspirations, and social expectations, on academic change. These findings are consistent with those of Van Bragt et al. (2024) and Ertl & Hartmann (2022), who found that students change their majors when their personal interests and career goals do not fully align with their current academic paths. These findings underscore the importance of professional and social factors in Oman's cultural context, where family expectations and social norms often shape educational decisions, as demonstrated by the studies of Zhang et al. (2023) and Kim et al. (2024).

One notable finding of this study was the absence of statistical significance for health-related factors, suggesting that physical or medical conditions were not decisive determinants of academic pathway shifts within the examined sample. This outcome contrasts with international research that highlights the disruptive role of health issues in academic progression, suggesting that contextual factors in the Omani setting may mitigate these effects. A plausible explanation lies in the sample's demographic composition, which consisted largely of young, healthy students for whom health challenges are less likely to affect educational decisions. Furthermore, the availability of comprehensive healthcare services and institutional support at Sultan Qaboos University may have reduced the salience of health-related barriers. Consequently, health factors did not emerge as influential when compared to stronger academic, institutional, and social determinants. These findings reinforce the argument that the impact of health on academic mobility is context-dependent, becoming more prominent only in cases involving chronic or severe conditions.

The findings also emphasized the importance of institutional support, specifically the critical role of academic advising and faculty engagement in reducing unnecessary academic mobility. The strong predictive value of the university environment confirms previous evidence that institutional climate, the quality of support services, and access to academic advising all significantly influence students' academic decisions (Loes et al., 2024; Mattanah et al., 2024). From this perspective, strengthening proactive advising mechanisms, early intervention programs, and career guidance initiatives may

help reduce unplanned academic transfers and support students in achieving better academic adjustment.

These findings carry several broader implications. First, they emphasize the need for universities to integrate academic, social, and career counseling services to help students make informed academic decisions. Second, the high proportion of students admitted to non-first-choice programs underscores the need to revisit admission and placement policies to better align with students' interests and competencies. Finally, by situating these results within the context of Oman's Vision 2040, the study underscores that improving student retention and academic stability directly contributes to the development of knowledge-based human capital, a strategic priority for the nation.

While this study enriches the literature on academic pathway mobility in Gulf and Arab contexts, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The research was confined to a single institution, which may limit the generalizability of the results to other settings. Additionally, the cross-sectional design restricts the ability to infer causal relationships between predictors and academic mobility. Future research should consider longitudinal and mixed-method approaches to capture the dynamic nature of academic transitions, including the long-term effects on academic adjustment, performance, and employability. Comparative studies across different cultural and national contexts would also provide deeper insights into the influence of sociocultural factors on academic mobility patterns.

## 6. Conclusion

This study provided empirical evidence on the psychosocial and institutional factors shaping students' academic pathway shifts at Sultan Qaboos University. The analysis revealed that the university environment and academic factors were the most influential determinants, significantly increasing students' likelihood of changing their academic paths. Personal considerations and social/professional influences also played important roles, underscoring the relevance of individual motivations and cultural expectations in the Omani context. In contrast, health-related factors did not show a significant impact, highlighting the contextual nature of academic mobility in a setting where healthcare services are accessible and students are predominantly young and healthy.

These findings contribute three key insights. First, they demonstrate that institutional conditions and academic experiences are central drivers of academic stability or disruption. Second, they reveal that family expectations and social aspirations remain highly relevant in shaping students' choices, reflecting cultural dynamics in Oman and the wider Arab region. Third, the study identifies that health concerns are not universal predictors of academic change, but rather context-dependent, becoming more salient only under chronic or severe conditions.

From a strategic perspective, the study's contribution lies in linking these findings to Oman's Vision 2040, which emphasizes the development of knowledge-based human capital. By addressing the institutional and psychosocial drivers of academic mobility, universities can align retention strategies with national priorities. Strengthening academic advising, integrating career and social counseling, and refining admission policies to better reflect students' interests and competencies will directly support the objectives of Vision 2040, ensuring that higher education contributes effectively to sustainable national development.

Overall, this research offers a clear, context-specific understanding of academic pathway shifts and provides a structured basis for policies and practices aimed at enhancing student stability, improving academic success, and fostering alignment with Oman's broader educational and developmental aspirations.

## Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this study carry significant implications for higher education practices and institutional policymaking.

1. First, the strong influence of academic and institutional factors on pathway shifts underscores the need to strengthen academic advising systems and provide proactive guidance to students at critical transition points. Structured mentoring, increased academic counseling, and early interventions for students at risk of probation could reduce unnecessary academic mobility and improve student retention.

2. Second, the effective role of personal and professional/social factors highlights the importance of adopting a holistic approach that integrates academic services with psychosocial and career guidance. Universities should also enhance student and family engagement by organizing community awareness lectures and professional development workshops that align with students' social expectations and long-term career aspirations. Such initiatives can increase students' confidence in their choices and decrease the likelihood of frequent program changes.

3. Third, although health-related factors were not statistically significant in this study, maintaining robust and accessible healthcare services remains essential. Institutional policies should continue to ensure that medical support structures are available, particularly for students with chronic or severe conditions, to buffer against potential disruptions.

4. Finally, at the policy level, the results support the development of data-driven monitoring systems to identify students at risk of transfer early in their academic journey. By integrating academic, social, and career guidance, universities can achieve higher retention rates, enhance academic stability, and better align program offerings with student needs. Collectively, these measures not only strengthen institutional effectiveness but also contribute to Oman's broader Vision 2040 objectives of promoting human capital development and reducing educational waste.

## 7. Suggestion for Future Research

Building upon the findings and limitations of this study, several directions for future research are recommended.

1. First, future studies should expand the sample size and include students from multiple higher education institutions across Oman and the Gulf region. Such expansion would improve the generalizability of results and allow for institutional comparisons.

2. Second, the current study relied on a quantitative cross-sectional design; future research may benefit from incorporating qualitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups, to capture the deeper cultural, psychological, and social dynamics that shape students' academic decisions. Mixed-methods approaches could provide a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon.

3. Third, longitudinal studies are strongly recommended to follow students over time and examine the long-term consequences of academic pathway shifts on academic performance, career development, and personal well-being. Such designs can also reveal whether the predictors identified in this study remain consistent across different academic stages.

4. Fourth, comparative research between Western and Arab/Gulf contexts could enrich the theoretical discourse by highlighting how cultural and institutional differences influence academic mobility. This would allow for a better understanding of the role of contextual factors in shaping pathway shifts.

5. Finally, future studies could explore the effectiveness of specific institutional interventions—such as enhanced academic advising, mentoring programs, and family engagement initiatives—in

reducing academic attrition and supporting student stability. Evaluating the impact of such practices will help policymakers and educators design evidence-based strategies that align with Oman's Vision 2040 goals.

## Declarations

**Author Contributions.** Introduction and literature review, Wafa Said Al-Maamari and Amal Al-Salti; Methodology, Jamal Al-Azki; Validation, Suliman Zakaria Abdalla; Formal analysis, Suliman Zakaria Abdalla; Investigation, Hosni Ibrahim Abdelazim; Resources, Wafa Said Al-Maamari; Data curation, Raya Khamis Hamed Al-Battahi; Writing—original draft preparation, Ahmed Thabet Helal Ibrahim; Writing—review and editing, Ahmed Thabet Helal Ibrahim; Visualization, Aisha Al-Badi; Supervision, Wafa Said Al-Maamari; Project administration, Ahmed Thabet Helal Ibrahim; Funding acquisition, Ahmed Thabet Helal Ibrahim.

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**Informed Consent Statement.** Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses.

**Data Availability Statement.** Data available upon request from the corresponding author.

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## Appendix

### A. Academic Pathway Shift Factors Questionnaire (APSFQ) Items

Factor	Items
<b>1. University Environment</b>	1. The learning environment lacks proper conditions such as ventilation and lighting.
	2. The study environment is unmotivating and causes daily depression.
	3. Lecture durations are too long, causing mental and physical exhaustion.
	4. Classrooms are overcrowded and hinder concentration.
	5. The university is far from my residence, increasing my fatigue.
	6. The university environment lacks recreational activities
	7. The environment lacks recreational areas or resting spaces between lectures.
	8. The general atmosphere makes me feel isolated and disconnected from others.
	9. Noise in the academic environment constantly distracts me.
	10. I did not receive sufficient academic guidance when choosing my major.
<b>2. Academic Factors</b>	11. Faculty members are unsupportive and inconsiderate of student circumstances.
	12. Lectures are boring and lack creativity or real-life examples.
	13. Course content is complex and irrelevant to real life.
	14. The curriculum is difficult and full of unexplained jargon.
	15. The course load is too heavy and overwhelming.
	16. Academic pressure makes me feel constantly exhausted.
	17. My grades and GPA are consistently declining due to assessment difficulty.
	18. Exams are unfair and do not reflect my true performance.
	19. The courses lack enjoyable or beneficial practical applications.
	20. Professors do not provide constructive feedback.
	21. The curriculum is outdated and doesn't reflect current advancements.
	22. I feel like studying is about memorization, not understanding or creativity.
<b>3. Personal Factors</b>	23. I feel out of place and misaligned with my personality or interests.
	24. I discovered my true interests late due to family or societal pressure.
	25. I lost motivation due to depression or frustration.
	26. I am more inclined to humanities than the scientific major I'm enrolled in.
	27. I chose my track to meet family expectations, not my own interest.
	28. I regret not discovering my interests during high school.
	29. My current major does not align with my ambitions.
	30. I feel constant boredom and no sense of belonging.
	31. I lack psychological support from family or friends to cope with my major
	32. I feel disconnected from my current field.
	<b>4. Professional and Social Factors</b>
34. I realized the major has no clear or stable career future.	
35. Males are more likely to be hired in this field than females.	
36. Social stigma toward the major affects my self-esteem.	
37. Society doesn't value or respect this specialization.	
38. Expected salaries are low compared to the effort required.	
39. There are no practical training opportunities to build my skills.	
40. The major is not aligned with current technological trends.	
41. Alumni reported discouraging job prospects.	
42. I fear graduating without competitive job skills.	
43. I was influenced by my family's opinions when choosing my current major	

<b>5. Health-Related Factors</b>	44. I suffer from health problems that affected my ability to continue studying in my previous major
	45. The nature of my previous major required physical or mental effort that I could not bear
	46. My health condition or the pressures of anxiety and depression contributed to my desire to change majors
	47. I felt that another major would be more suitable for my health condition
	48. I had to miss lectures and exams due to my health condition, which affected my academic performance
	49. I feel that my previous major worsened my physical or mental condition instead of helping me achieve stability
	50. The academic pressure in my previous major negatively affected my sleep and physical health
	51. Doctors or health specialists advised me to consider changing my major to reduce psychological or physical burdens
	52. I face family-related problems that prevented me from continuing in my previous major

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