



Parental Influence on First-Year Students' Choice of Academic Major in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how parental influence shapes first-year students' choice of academic major at public and private higher education institutions in Vientiane Capital, Lao PDR, where formal career guidance remains limited and families often provide the main source of advice. Using a quantitative cross-sectional design, data were collected from 390 first-year students at two public university faculties and two private institutions through a validated 36-item Likert-scale questionnaire. Overall parental influence was moderate ($M = 3.228$, $SD = 0.502$) and operated mainly through career self-efficacy and support rather than pressure. Sociodemographic factors explained only limited variation, although first-generation status and father's education were significant. Students in public institutions seemed to receive more influence from their parents than those in private institutions. This difference was clearer in the areas of family values and career communication. The mediation analysis suggested that students' aspirations played an important role in explaining how parental influence was linked to choosing a major that matched students' own interests. Student agency also explained part of this relationship, but not completely. These findings challenge the assumption that parental influence in collectivist settings is always directive. They also suggest the need for career guidance systems that involve families while helping students strengthen their own aspirations and decision-making capacity.

Keywords: Parental influence; Major selection; Higher education; Student aspirations; Cultural capital

1. Introduction

Lao PDR is entering an important phase of national development, marked by its expected graduation from Least Developed Country status and a stronger policy focus on building a skilled and competitive workforce (MoES, 2026). In this context, it is important to look at how young people continue from secondary school to higher education and how they decide on fields of study that are related to future employment and the country's development needs. (ASEAN, 2021). However, major-selection decisions in Lao PDR often take place in a context where formal career guidance at the secondary level remains limited, especially outside major urban areas (Lao People's Revolutionary Youth Union [LPRYU], 2021). Recent data show that student participation in upper secondary education and public higher education has declined. They also show differences between public and private institutions in how many planned student places were actually filled (MoES, 2026). Parents are usually the first people students ask for advice and support when they think about their study choice. Parents also help shape students' understanding of family expectations. This issue is also important because national policy sees human resource development as a key part of long-term development planning. The 2025 Strategy and 2030 Vision aims to move the workforce from traditional roles toward skills that are better aligned with changing regional and global labor-market demands. Although policy documents call for better access to vocational education and closer links between curriculum and employment needs, they also show an important gap. Career counselling services are still limited in many institutions. As a result, families have to provide much of this guidance. Parents often become the main people who help students think about their future career paths (ASEAN, 2021). This role is also reflected in the Lao Youth and Adolescent Development Strategy 2021–2030, which identifies education and skills development as central to youth contribution to national development and recognizes the influence of families in young people's educational and career decisions, particularly among students from rural, poor, and disadvantaged backgrounds (LPRYU, 2021).

Two broad global patterns also support the focus of this study. Starting with family background remains a persistent factor in educational participation and attainment. Comparative indicators continue to show gaps in tertiary participation and completion linked to parental education, reflecting unequal access to resources, information, and the skills needed to navigate education systems (OECD, 2025). Following the previous research shows that parental involvement can affect students' academic results in different ways. This depends on how parents were involved, how old the students are, and the situation in which the study was conducted (Fan & Chen, 2001; Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Hill & Tyson, 2009). Parental influence does not work in only one way. It has different parts and depends a lot on the situation.

These global findings point to the central issue this study takes up: parental influence function as supportive guidance that builds students' confidence and decision-making, or as directive pressure that narrows exploration and steers young people toward socially approved options. This point is important for major selection because students have to balance their personal interests, possible job benefits in the future, and their family's expectations.

The scale of these structural pressures is substantial and has increased in recent years. The 10th ESSSDP reports that overall upper-secondary enrollment fell by approximately 16% compared with 2019–2020. The report also shows that student enrollment at public universities in Lao PDR decreased by 26.9% between 2020–2021 and 2024–2025. During this period, public universities filled only 41% of their allocated intake places, compared with 73% at private institutions (MoES, 2026). The plan links much of this decline to household economic hardship, noting that financially pressured families increasingly favor immediate employment or fields of study perceived to offer more secure and faster returns. Taken together, this national-level evidence points to a plausible dynamic: as institutional capacity weakens and household economic pressure mounts, parents may end up playing a more decisive role in whether students continue into higher education at all, and which major they choose.

Although parental influence is widely recognized in Lao education, there is still limited empirical evidence on how it shapes major choice specifically, rather than access to higher education in general. In Lao studies, parental social and economic background was often discussed as a general factor influencing student enrollment in higher education. For example, research at Champasak University shows that parental education, income, and occupation influence students' higher-education choices and the range of options they see as possible, with students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds reporting greater freedom to choose majors aligned with personal interest (Moonphoxay et al., 2024). Related work at Souphanouvong University identifies family factors as one cause among several behind declining entrance-exam registration and enrollment, but it does not isolate how parental influence shapes the specific major a student selects (Keoboualaphet et al., 2024). Regional studies similarly show that family expectations and perceived labor-market returns can shape students' university and career choices, but they often do not focus on major selection as a separate decision in the Lao higher-education context (Nguyen et al., 2023; Sovanvatthana et al., 2024). This gap is important for policy. The 10th ESSSDP emphasizes career guidance and sets targets to increase and gender-balance enrollment in STEM fields, from 27% to 40% of domestic higher-education enrollment, with female participation targeted to rise from 47% to 50%. This is set against a current TVET gender-parity index of only 0.58 (MoES, 2026). Yet the plan provides limited evidence on who currently guides students' major-selection decisions and how this guidance differs across student groups and institution types. Three gaps stand out in particular. First, no published Lao study reports the extent to which parental influence shapes which major a student selects, as distinct from whether the student continues to higher education. Second, no Lao study has measured parental influence as a multidimensional construct that includes socioeconomic resources, expectations and pressure, involvement style, role modelling, and cultural or gender norms using a validated instrument. Third, no Lao study has examined how the extent and composition of parental influence vary by institution type, faculty, or student sociodemographic background, despite documented differences in intake fulfillment between public institutions (41%) and private institutions (73%) (MoES, 2026).

This study investigates the level of parental influence on first-year students' academic major choices in public and private higher education institutions in Vientiane Capital. It focuses on three areas: (1) the overall extent and dimensions of parental influence; (2) variation across sociodemographic characteristics, including sex, parental education, family income, first-generation status, and funding source; and (3) variation between public and private institutions and across faculties. The study also investigates whether student agency and aspirations play a mediating role in the relationship between parental influence and the fit between students' chosen majors and their personal interests. Drawing on Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent et al., 1994), the study proposes three hypotheses: parental influence is positively associated with student aspirations and agency (H1); student aspirations and agency mediate the relationship between parental influence and major-interest alignment (H2); and the extent of parental influence differs by institution type and sociodemographic background (H3). Three research questions guide the study.

RQ1: To what extent do parent influence the academic major choices of first-year students at selected higher education institutions in Vientiane Capital?

RQ2: To what extent does parental influence vary across students with different sociodemographic characteristics, including sex, parental education, family income, first-generation status, and funding sources?

RQ3: How does parental influence differ between students enrolled in public and private institutions in Vientiane Capital, and does it vary across faculties?

This study adds to the literature in three respects. It treats major selection as a distinct decision rather than as a proxy for general access to higher education. It treats parental influence as a multidimensional phenomenon rather than limiting it to socioeconomic characteristics alone. It also compares students in public and private institutions and explores how parental influence affects students' aspirations including whether their chosen major match with their personal interests. The aim is to inform career guidance systems that engage families as partners while also strengthening students' capacity to make informed educational decisions.

2. Methods

The study is based on a framework that combines Social Cognitive Career Theory, Expectancy-Value Theory, and Bourdieu's theory of capital (Lent et al., 1994; Eccles et al., 1983; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Bourdieu, 1986). The framework conceptualized parental influence as comprising five interrelated dimensions such as expectations and pressure, career role modelling, support and involvement, cultural and gender norms, and career communication. Parental influence is modelled as shaping major-selection outcomes through student agency and student aspirations. The influence of parents is also expected to vary across six sociodemographic characteristics: sex, socioeconomic status, parental education, family income, first-generation status, and funding source. The study examines outcomes in terms of alignment between students' chosen majors and their personal interests, alignment with parental preferences, and institutional placement.

2.1 Population and Sample Group

A quantitative cross-sectional survey was conducted in Vientiane Capital. The study was conducted across four higher education institutions in Vientiane Capital, including two public university faculties (Economics and Engineering) and two private institutions (Rattana Business Administration Institution and Soutsaka Institution). Simultaneously, these institutions enrolled 2,629 first-year students, who formed the study population. Proportionate stratified sampling was then applied with each institution serving as a separate stratum and followed by simple random sampling within each stratum. As a result, there was a final sample of 390 students, comprising 222 students from public institutions (56.9%) and 168 from private institutions (43.1%). The sample included 209 female students (53.6%) and 181 male students (46.4%).

2.2 Research Instruments

The survey instrument used a five-point Likert scale and consisted of 36 items across eight subscales. Six subscales measured parental influence: parental expectations and pressure (PEP), parental career role modelling (PCRM), parental support and involvement (PSI), parental values and cultural beliefs (PVCB), parental career communication (PCCC), and career decision self-efficacy (CSE). Two subscales measured student agency (AGY) and student aspirations (ASP). The questionnaire was reviewed by experts and piloted with 40 students before the main survey. Cronbach's alpha was above 0.70 for all subscales. The overall reliability coefficient was 0.814 (Table 1), indicating good internal consistency.

Table 1. Instrument reliability (Cronbach's alpha) by subscale.

Subscale	Items	α	Interpretation
PEP - Expectations & Pressure	8	0.809	Good
PCRM - Career Role Modelling	6	0.860	Good
PSI - Support & Involvement	6	0.868	Good
PVCB - Values & Cultural Beliefs	6	0.753	Acceptable
PCCC - Career Communication	5	0.770	Acceptable
CSE - Career Self-Efficacy	6	0.829	Good
AGY - Student Agency	5	0.757	Acceptable
ASP - Student Aspirations	5	0.866	Good
Overall instrument (36 items)	36	0.814	Good

Note: 0.70-0.79 = Acceptable; 0.80-0.89 = Good; ≥ 0.90 = Excellent. $n = 390$.

2.3 Data Collection

Data were collected from first-year students at the selected public and private higher education institutions in Vientiane Capital using the validated questionnaire. The main survey was conducted after expert review and pilot testing, and responses were gathered from the final sample of 390 students.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Stata program. Reliability analysis was first performed to assess the internal consistency of the instrument and its subscales. Descriptive statistics were then used to examine the overall level and dimensions of parental influence. Group differences were assessed using independent-samples t-tests, one-way ANOVA with Bonferroni post-hoc comparisons, multiple linear regression, and chi-square tests. Mediation effects were examined using the Baron and Kenny (1986) approach, with Sobel tests used to evaluate indirect effects (Sobel, 1982).

Multiple linear regression was used to examine whether the overall Parental Influence Index (PII) varied by sex, first-generation status, parental education, family income, and funding source. Mediation by student agency and student aspirations in the relationship between parental influence and major-interest alignment was tested using a three-equation sequence. This included the total effect of PII on major-interest alignment (c), the effect of PII on the mediator (path a), the effect of the mediator on major-interest alignment while controlling for PII (path b), and the remaining direct effect of PII after adding the mediator (c'). Indirect effects were calculated as $a \times b$ and tested using Sobel z-tests. Full mediation was interpreted when c' became non-significant after the mediator was added. Partial mediation was interpreted when c' remained significant but became smaller than the total effect.

3. Results

A total of 390 first-year students participated in the study. Of these, 56.9% were enrolled in public institutions and 43.1% in private institutions. The sample included slightly more female students (53.6%) than male students (46.4%). Gender distribution varied across institutions and faculties (Table 2). Parents or guardians were the main source of education funding for 84.1% of respondents.

Table 2. Respondent distribution by institution and sex.

Institution	n	Male (n)	Female (n)	Male %	Female %
Faculty of Economics	148	59	89	39.9	60.1
Faculty of Engineering	74	61	13	82.4	17.6
Soutsaka Institution	70	40	30	57.1	42.9
Rattana Business Admin. Institution	98	21	77	21.4	78.6

The results reflected variation in ethnic background, family educational experience, parental occupation, and household economic circumstances. Most respondents identified as Lao-Tai (82.8%), followed by Hmong-Iumien (10.5%), Mon-Khmer (5.1%), and Chin-Tibetan (1.5%). A total of 163 respondents (41.8%) were first-generation college students, indicating that neither parent had completed higher education.

Parental occupations varied across the sample. Fathers were most commonly employed as government officials (31.5%) or were self-employed and business owners (25.9%). Among mothers, self-employment and business ownership was the most common category (37.9%), while 16.4% reported not currently working.

Household income data should be interpreted with caution because 37.2% of respondents chose not to report their income. Among those who did, the largest group reported a monthly household income above 12 million kip (18.2%). Financial support for higher education came mainly from families. Most respondents (84.1%) relied on parents or guardians as their primary funding source, whereas 11.8% were self-funded and only a small proportion reported receiving government or private scholarships.

The first notable pattern in the data is that parental influence, overall, sat at a moderate level and leaned toward support rather than pressure. The overall Parental Influence Index (PII) fell within the moderate range, with a mean score of 3.228 (SD = 0.502). Among the subscales, only Career Decision Self-Efficacy ($M = 3.677$) and Parental Support and Involvement ($M = 3.623$) reached the High band (Table 3). By contrast, Parental Expectations and Pressure had the lowest mean score ($M = 2.658$). The findings suggest that parental influence operates mainly through support and encouragement rather than pressure. Parents appeared more likely to build students' confidence and remain involved in decision-making than to direct their choices.

Table 3. Mean scores and interpretation of parental influence dimensions.

Subscale	Items	M	SD	Band
CSE - Career Self-Efficacy	6	3.677	0.671	High
PSI - Support & Involvement	6	3.623	0.761	High
PCCC - Career Communication	5	3.359	0.689	Moderate
PCRM - Role Modelling	6	3.046	0.863	Moderate
PVCB - Cultural Beliefs	6	3.007	0.687	Moderate
PEP - Expectations & Pressure	8	2.658	0.704	Moderate
Overall PII (36 items)	36	3.228	0.502	Moderate

Note: Bands: ≥ 4.21 Very High; 3.41-4.20 High; 2.61-3.40 Moderate; 1.81-2.60 Low; ≤ 1.80 Very Low.

Item-level results support this interpretation. Within the Parental Expectations and Pressure subscale, students reported that parents sometimes expressed a preferred major ($M = 3.236$) and discussed career expectations before enrollment ($M = 3.277$). However, the item measuring financial coercion, "parents threatened to withhold financial support," had the lowest mean of all 36 items ($M = 1.762$), with 76.4% of respondents disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. That gap is telling: parents commonly voice their expectations but rarely back them with financial threats. In the Parental Support and Involvement subscale, all six items were in the High band. The highest-rated items were parents encouraging and reassuring students when they were unsure ($M =$

3.787) and parents encouraging a major aligned with the student's own interests ($M = 3.721$). On balance, then, the family role here looks supportive more than controlling. They are also consistent with students' own responses: 58.5% reported meaningful personal agency in major selection, and 67.1% said they would choose the same or probably the same major if parental influence were absent.

Most sociodemographic characteristics showed little association with overall parental influence. Overall PII did not differ significantly by student sex (male $M = 3.180$, $SD = 0.534$; female $M = 3.271$, $SD = 0.470$; $t(388) = -1.785$, $p = .075$, $d = -0.181$). However, there was one important subscale difference: female students reported higher perceived Parental Career Role Modelling than male students ($M = 3.200$ vs. 2.867 ; $t(388) = -3.866$, $p < .001$). Overall parental influence did not differ significantly between male and female students. However, female students reported higher levels of parental career role modelling.

The result of multiple regression model on all sociodemographic predictors was not statistically significant ($F(13, 376) = 1.45$, $p = .136$, $R^2 = .048$), meaning that these characteristics together explained less than 5% of the variance in PII. Within this general pattern, two variables showed significant differences. First-generation students reported lower PII than non-first-generation students ($M = 3.153$ vs. 3.282 ; $t(388) = -2.516$, $p = .012$, $d = -0.258$), mainly because they reported lower Role Modelling and Support/Involvement scores. Father's education was also significant: students whose fathers had a bachelor's degree or above reported higher PII than those whose fathers had lower-secondary education or below ($M = 3.305$ vs. 3.157 ; $F(2, 387) = 3.42$, $p = .034$). While mother's education, family income, and funding source were not statistically significant. The income result should be read cautiously because more than one-third of respondents did not report household income.

Regression diagnostics supported the interpretation of this model. It indicated acceptable homoscedasticity ($p = .083$) model specification ($p = .720$), and multicollinearity levels (all variance inflation factors below 10; mean VIF = 3.20). These results suggest that the model was specified appropriately. The low explanatory power is therefore unlikely to be caused by problems in the model. A small non-significant pattern was also observed: self-funded students reported slightly lower PII ($M = 3.110$) than students funded mainly by parents or guardians ($M = 3.250$), but this difference was not statistically significant ($F(2, 387) = 1.87$, $p = .156$).

A third pattern involves institution type: it was associated with parental influence, though the difference was modest and limited to a few specific dimensions. Students in public institutions reported significantly higher overall PII than students in private institutions ($M = 3.278$ vs. 3.163 ; $t(388) = 2.252$, $p = .025$, $d = 0.230$). The subscale differences were values or cultural beliefs ($p = .007$), career communication ($p = .005$), and career self-efficacy ($p = .026$). Expectations or pressure, role modelling, and support or involvement did not differ significantly by sector. Students from public institutions scored higher on family communication, values and cultural beliefs, and career self-efficacy. Pressure-related measures showed little variation between sectors.

Table 4 provides the detailed subscale comparison between public and private institutions. The test indicated equal variances across all six subscales. Standard independent samples t-tests were therefore used for the comparisons. The pattern confirms that the sector difference was specific rather than general: public-institution students scored higher on communicative and values-based dimensions, while pressure-related indicators remained similar across sectors.

Table 4. Public-private differences in parental influence dimensions.

Subscale	Public (M)	Private (M)	t	p	d
PEP	2.703	2.599	1.450	.148	0.148
PCRM	3.051	3.039	0.140	.889	0.014
PSI	3.638	3.602	0.461	.645	0.047
PVCB *	3.089	2.900	2.709	.007	0.277
PCCC *	3.444	3.248	2.813	.005	0.288
CSE *	3.742	3.590	2.229	.026	0.228
PII (Overall) *	3.278	3.163	2.252	.025	0.230

Note: * $p < .05$ (two-tailed). d = Cohen's d . Levene's test confirmed equal variances for all six subscale comparisons.

Institution-level patterns add further nuance. Within the public sector, overall PII did not differ significantly between the Faculty of Economics ($M = 3.264$, $SD = 0.510$) and the Faculty of Engineering ($M = 3.306$, $SD = 0.484$; $t(220) = -0.595$, $p = .553$), despite their different gender compositions (Table 2). In contrast, the largest overall PII difference reported in Table 5 occurred between the two private institutions ($d = 0.589$). That points to institutional context mattering in its own right, particularly among private institutions. However, no significant differences were found by institution type in students' perceived influence over major choice ($p = .223$) or in the alignment between student and parental preferences ($p = .546$).

Table 5. Overall Parental Influence Index by background and institutional factors.

Comparison	Groups (M)	Test statistic	Effect size
First-generation status	3.153 vs. 3.282	$t(388) = -2.516, p = .012^*$	$d = -0.258$
Father's education	3.305 (degree+) vs. 3.157 ($\leq$ lower sec.)	$F(2,387) = 3.42, p = .034^*$	-
Institution sector	3.278 (public) vs. 3.163 (private)	$t(388) = 2.252, p = .025^*$	$d = 0.230$
Private institutions (largest gap)	3.283 vs. 2.994	$t(166) = -3.859, p < .001^{***}$	$d = 0.589$

Note: Sex, mother's education, family income, and funding source were not significant (all $p > 0.05$). $^*p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{***}p < 0.001$.

A related chi-square test showed that institution type was significantly associated with hypothetical counterfactual major choice ($\chi^2(4) = 16.57, p = .002$, Cramér's $V = 0.206$). Private-institution students were more likely than public-institution students to say they would have chosen the same major independently (53.6% vs. 39.6%). Public-institution students were more likely to be unsure (23.0% vs. 8.9%). That pattern hints at something specific: public-institution students may simply be less certain what their preferences would look like without parental input.

The mediation results (Table 6) showed that student aspirations fully mediated the relationship between parental influence and personal-interest alignment ($a = 0.609, p < .001$; $b = -0.504, p < .001$; indirect $a \times b = -0.307$, Sobel $z = -10.190, p < .001$). After student aspirations were added to the model, the direct effect became non-significant ($c' p = .123$). Student agency partially mediated the same relationship ($a = 0.398, p < .001$; $b = -0.440, p < .001$; indirect $a \times b = -0.175$, Sobel $z = -10.554, p < .001$), while the direct effect remained significant ($c' p = .004$). Student agency and aspirations did not mediate the relationship between parental influence and alignment with parental preferences. This relationship appears to operate independently of the two mediators examined in the study.

Table 6. Mediation pathways linking parental influence to major-choice alignment.

Mediation path	Path a	Path b	$a \times b$	Sobel z	P-value
PII $\rightarrow$ AGY $\rightarrow$ Fit (self) [Partial]	0.398***	-0.440***	-0.175	-10.554	< .001
PII $\rightarrow$ AGY $\rightarrow$ Fit (parent) [ns]	0.398***	0.126	0.050	1.360	.174
PII $\rightarrow$ ASP $\rightarrow$ Fit (self) [Full]	0.609***	-0.504***	-0.307	-10.190	< .001
PII $\rightarrow$ ASP $\rightarrow$ Fit (parent) [ns]	0.609***	-0.059	-0.036	-0.689	.491

Note: $^{***}p < 0.001$.

4. Discussion

These results challenge the widely held belief that parental influence in collectivist environments is intrinsically directive or controlling. In this urban Lao sample, parental influence was moderate and operated mainly through support, encouragement, and confidence-building rather than pressure. This pattern is consistent with Social Cognitive Career Theory, which explains how parents can influence students' educational choices by strengthening career self-efficacy (Lent et al., 1994), and with recent evidence on parental involvement and career decision-making self-efficacy among adolescents in collectivist cultures (Damas & Kurniawati, 2025). Additionally, it is consistent with Hardie's (2022) differentiation between directive and developmental kinds of parental influence. In the Lao context, where formal career-guidance systems remain limited in many settings (MoES, 2026), parents may partly fill the guidance role that schools and institutions are not yet able to provide. The very low score for coercive financial pressure is also important. Although economic constraint is well documented in Lao education (Moonphoxay et al., 2024; MoES, 2021), students in this sample did not commonly report direct threats or force from parents. This suggests that family economic expectations may be experienced more as shared responsibility or internalized obligation than as explicit coercion, which is consistent with Bourdieu's (1986) concept of habitus.

This study's most obvious theoretical contribution may be seen in the mediation findings. The association between parental influence and alignment between major choice and personal interest was slightly mediated by student autonomy, while it was totally mediated by student goals. This means that stronger parental influence did not appear to move students away from their own interests through direct control. Instead, parental influence worked mainly by shaping students' aspirations and, to a lesser extent, their sense of agency in making educational choices. In practical terms, what students described as their own interests may partly reflect family values and expectations that have already been internalized. This interpretation is consistent with Bourdieu's (1986) view that social expectations can become part of individual dispositions, and with Expectancy-Value Theory, which explains how families transmit values about education and careers to children (Eccles et al., 1983). It also aligns with evidence that parent motivational practices can shape students' selection of academic fields, including STEM-related choices (Niu, 2016). The finding that neither mediator explained alignment

with parents' own preferences suggests that parental preference may operate through a more direct pathway, separate from students' internalized aspirations and agency.

It was also important to consider how little sociodemographic background contributed to this. Only a minor portion of the variation in parental influence was explained by sex, parental education, family wealth, first-generation status, and funding source taken collectively. First-generation status and the father's level of education, however, were notable exceptions. First-generation students reported less parental involvement, particularly in terms of support and role modeling. This could be a result of parents who have never attended college having less firsthand awareness of academic trajectories and institutional expectations. The idea that parental education can influence educational achievements more than income or occupation is further supported by the father's substantial educational contribution (Erola et al., 2016). From Bourdieu's (1986) cultural-capital perspective, the key issue may not be financial resources alone, but the family's familiarity with higher education and its ability to provide informed guidance, a pattern also discussed in studies of class-based differences in family engagement with schooling (Lareau, 2011).

The public-private difference adds a further wrinkle: parental influence clearly depends on institutional context, though this pattern needs careful interpretation. Public-institution students reported higher overall parental influence than private-institution students, yet this difference was modest and concentrated in values, career communication, and career self-efficacy. It was not driven by greater pressure. One possible interpretation is that public university pathways carry stronger symbolic and practical value for families because they are linked to national development priorities, public-sector employment expectations, and more selective admission processes. These conditions may encourage more family discussion about the meaning and consequences of major choice. At the same time, admission systems can sort students into institutions and faculties in ways that are not fully determined by either family preference or personal interest (Huang et al., 2023). So the sector difference is probably not, on its own, a story about parenting style. The larger difference observed between the two private institutions also suggests that institutional culture and program orientation may shape family involvement as much as public-private status.

The findings should be interpreted with several limitations in mind. The data were collected at a single point in time, making it difficult to establish the direction of relationships among parental influence, aspirations, agency, and major-interest alignment. A longitudinal study would provide stronger evidence on how these relationships develop over time. In addition, parental influence was measured through student self-reports only, which may have affected responses to sensitive items related to parental pressure.

5. Conclusion

This study looked at the impact of parents on first-year students' academic major choices in a few Vientiane Capital higher education institutions. Parental impact was moderate overall. Support, encouragement, career communication, and confidence-building were the top ways that students reported being influenced. There were few reports of direct pressure. The majority of sociodemographic traits had little correlation with parental influence. The mother's level of education and household income were not significant factors. On the other hand, variations in parental influence were linked to the father's level of education and first-generation status. These results demonstrate how family experiences with higher education influence the advice that students can get. Compared to students in private colleges, those in public institutions reported greater levels of family involvement. Career communication, shared values, and career self-efficacy were the main areas of difference. However, the largest gap was observed between two private institutions, suggesting that institutional context may be as important as sector. Parental involvement was associated with major-interest alignment through student goals and agency, according to the mediation study. Parental influence seemed to influence how students saw and assessed their educational options rather than directly overriding their desires. Therefore, rather than being opposing factors, family direction and personal interest appear to be closely related. These results have consequences for Lao PDR career counselling. When choosing a major, parents continue to be a crucial source of support. Involving parents in career advising programs may therefore be beneficial while also assisting students in developing their own decision-making and career planning abilities. Major decisions that more accurately represent students' interests as well as their long-term academic and professional objectives may be supported by such initiatives.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest related to this study.

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