



Beyond Enrollment: Unpacking the Dropout Crisis in Nepalese Universities

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Abstract

Dropout is defined as the act of leaving an educational institution or program before its completion or university without earning the degree. This is reflecting as a growing trend in the universities and higher institutions in Nepal. This study is an attempt to find out the major causes behind the students' dropout from university courses and to find the solutions to this growing trend. The research adopted a mixed-method research design. The quantitative data were collected from forty teachers involved in teaching and learning at Tribhuvan University and Far Western University using a Google Form with questions that had multiple checkboxes to choose from. The collected data were analyzed using simple statistical tools. For the qualitative information, the researchers asked open-ended questions and conducted a focus group discussion among ten teachers selected using a purposive non-random sampling procedure. The collected data were then analyzed to find out the themes of the causes and solutions to the dropout. Significant findings suggested that migration abroad, academic failure or difficulty, financial hardships, and family responsibilities, a mismatch between students' expectations and the college environment, heavy-loaded course content, and the duration of the academic degree are the significant causes of the students' dropout. To reduce the dropout, counseling and job placement support, curriculum update, collaboration with industries, connecting learning to earning, and providing scholarships and financial aid to the students are measures that can be applied to reduce the dropout of students.

Keywords: Student enrollment, dropout, learn and earn, scholarship practices, preventing dropout

Introduction

Education plays an essential role in the socio-economic development of any nation, and Nepal is no exception. Over the years, there has been a growing concern about the increasing trend in student dropout rates at the college level in Nepal. The growing dropout rate demands a careful investigation of the root reasons and potential solutions to deal with this pressing problem.

The education system in Nepal has made remarkable progress in spreading its education system at the higher levels. The government has started many schemes and projects that promote higher education including the establishment of new colleges and universities (Bhatt, 2022). Despite these efforts, current years have observed a growing trend of students dropping out. Several factors have contributed to this trend, necessitating an in-depth analysis to understand the complex nature of the issue. Economic challenges, demographic shifts, changing societal expectations, and the impact of global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic are likely to be influencing factors.

The universities are facing problems both in enrollment and in the dropout of students before the completion of the degree. Camelia and Ramona (2018) present this situation in their words as 'The phenomenon of university dropout is met in all universities in the world and its effects are felt both at the economic level, at the level of society, and at the personal level of students who abandon the university.' If the problem is not identified and addressed on time, the situation of the universities is going to be very alarming.

Dropout is generally defined as students leaving their university or studies before completing the program and obtaining a degree. Dropout is a widespread issue in Nepalese institutions, especially in rural areas (Lagun & Sah, 2024). Dropout is a growing apprehension in the field of educational institutions. (Ghimire, 2024). Research has shown that dropout rates are higher in rural areas than in urban areas (Lagun & Sah, 2024). At the university level, we find dropouts in two different forms. One is leaving the program that one has joined and continuing the other program. It is very important to distinguish this from transfer, which is changing subjects within an institution, often taken as a voluntary dropout, whereas involuntary dropout usually leads to leaving university studies altogether (Kehm, Larsen, & Sommersel, 2019). University dropout is a phenomenon taken as problematic due to high rates, where students fail to complete tertiary studies. Dropout is recognized as a complex and multidimensional issue. Formal dropout is the process of leaving university studies altogether before degree completion and transferring to a different subject and/or institution before completion of the degree. Dropout can be categorized as involuntary dropout, which is mainly caused by academic failure, and voluntary dropout, which is caused by transfer to another institution or another subject (Larsen, Sommersel, et al, 2013). Internal drop-out occurs when a student who has previously exited a degree program subsequently enrolls in another Program within the same university or college. This phenomenon predominantly manifests during their initial semester and is often attributed to students selecting different degree paths based on misplaced motivations or inadequate guidance received from advisors or peers. (Hernández-Jiménez et al. 2020). Moreover, leaving the program or the course in one college/university and starting another outside the institution is termed as the external dropout. The student may be in the same degree program, but they may transfer to a different university due to life circumstances or internal or external reasons. Additionally, the student may continue their education at a lower level than university by pursuing different kinds of courses.

There are many causes behind the dropouts of students in the university. Some causes for the dropout are financial problems, lack of parental support, academic struggles, boredom, pregnancy, and parenthood (Lorenzo-Quiles, Galdón-López, & Lendínez-Turón, 2023). Robbins et al. (2004) listed the following reasons for dropout motivation for student success: academic goals,

institutional commitment, perceived social support, social involvement, self-assessment ability, self-perception, academic abilities, and contextual influences. According to Kehm et al. (2019), dropout rates in higher institutions are widespread worldwide and are brought on by a number of similar elements, such as motivation, sociodemographic circumstances, social integration, study environments, and other external circumstances. There are push and pull factors in dropout (Rouse, 2019). The factors originating within the chosen university or degree program related to student interests and competencies are the push factors, and the factors outside the university or degree program related to job offers, financial issues, or family problems are pull factors. Dropout has specific consequences for society, the university, and the student personally. University dropout has complex results that affect individual person, institution, and society at large, with implications ranging from personal psychological distress to Systemic economic insufficiencies (Trusty et al., 2025).

In academic discourse student dropout from higher education is now commonly referred to as a multi-dimensional phenomenon with long ranging effects on diverse levels. On a community level, dropout adds to social inequality because dropouts often have fewer job prospects, earn less income and reduces upward mobility. This further exacerbates cycles of poverty and inequality, especially in low-income areas. Dropout undermines the national development of human capital (Lorenzo- Quiles, Galdón-López & Lendínez-Turón, 2023) and undermines the labor market's ability to absorb skilled workers. At an institutional level, there are a number of effects that universities themselves could face, which policies towards drop out might cause them to have lower funding, negotiated performance measurement results and damage to reputation. Most world universities utilize a 4-year scheme that is based. In many countries, universities are in a large part funded by the round on enrollment, so in case of attrition there is a financial loss that impacts staffing and common infrastructure as well as program sustainability (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2025). Graduation rates have negative implications for the rankings and accreditation results of institutions, which also affect the prospective recruitment or stakeholder confidence (Rahmani et al. 2024). Individually, students frequently postponed their studies and struggled with psychological and self-conceptual issues such as doubtfulness, a sense of loss of selfhood and self-worth.

On a personal level, students would often cease their studies and struggle with psychological consequences, self-doubt, loss of identity, and diminished self-efficacy. These emotional burdens are heightened by differential costs incurred in tuition fees, leaving expenses, and opportunity costs without the compensatory benefit of a degree. Lamichhane et al. (2025) found in their study of Nepal University students that dropout not only leads to wasted resources but also erodes students' motivation and long-term aspirations. In conclusion, dropout is not only seen as an academic problem but also as a multidimensional challenge that requires corresponding involvement across policy, pedagogy, and psychological support systems.

Causes of dropouts

Students dropping the course/university is not affected by a single factor. It is the result of the factors associated with academic, economic, psychological, and institutional aspects. However, one single factor may not be applicable to all and there may be more than one factor for each of the

person who drop the course. For Lamichhane et al., (2025) the main cause of the student dropout is differences in school-level instruction and restricted access to high-quality learning resources, many students who joins the higher education academically without preparing academically may lead to take decision to drop the course. Financial difficulties account for 30% of college dropouts in the US, whereas academic disqualification accounts for 28%, according to Craft (2021). Similarly, Vlasova (2023) mentioned that the majority of the undergraduate 40% drop out due to financial issues and their timing issues to manage work and college life.

Due to financial limitations, a lack of scholarships, and pressure to contribute to household income, students from low-income and rural families frequently drop out of school before completing their degree, which is a significant contributing factor to socioeconomic adversity (Karki & Parajuli, 2023). Another major factor that influences dropout rates is issues related to psychology of the learners. These include stress, anxiety and low self-efficacy, this is mainly found among the participants who migrate from rural areas and struggle to adapt to urban academic environments (Sharma & Dachary, 2024). Occupational mismatch also contributes to student discontent and attrition because students often engage in programs based more on availability or parental pressure than on personal motivation (Kappa 2023). The other factor that is responsible for dropping the course is related to the curriculum and the structure that the students are supposed to study. The limitations generated in the institution, lack of academic support and having no proper counselling services does also deteriorate the conditions of dropout in the universities (Luitel & Pant, 2022). Some other minor causes of dropout may also be generated based on the personal aspects that are concerned to family obligations, issues related to health, migration and lack of employment issues (Evans & Tragant, 2020; Anne Houde, Richter, & Zimányi, 2023). In Nepal's socio-cultural context, adding to the dropout burden, particularly among first-generation learners (Lamichhane et al. 2025). These interlinked factors highlight the urgent need for context-sensitive interventions in the Nepalese higher education system, including financial aid reform, academic mentoring, and career guidance.

Methods and Procedures

To study the issues related to the dropout we adopted a mixed-methods research design. The study incorporated both quantitative and qualitative approaches to get the inclusive understanding of the issues related to student dropout in higher education institutions in Nepal. Mixed methods allowed us to triangulate and maintain the validity and reliability of the results. To obtain the quantitative data a survey research design was adopted and the qualitative data was collected through a focused group discussion. The survey was designed to collect teachers' perceptions on student dropout, and the focus group discussion was mainly targeted to explore in-depth perspectives, experiences, and interpretations of the teachers on the issues. The teachers teaching in Far Western University and Tribhuvan University were sent the questionnaire prepared in the Google Form and the responses were recorded till the forty teachers responded. The survey was closed when the responses reached the target. The sample was taken using non-random purposive sampling method, which was appropriate because the study sought participants who were directly engaged in teaching and had firsthand experiences with student issues. Out of the forty teachers who responded to the questionnaire 10 were requested to participate in the focused group

discussion. These participants represented different faculties and disciplines within higher education, so that they can provide a diverse perspective on the area under study. Quantitative data were collected using a structured survey questionnaire administered through Google Form, with items having a single option to choose and multiple checkboxes. The questionnaire included both closed-ended and open-ended items designed to explore teachers' perceptions of the causes and possible solutions to dropout problems. For qualitative data, a focus group discussion was conducted with 10 participants. The discussion was guided by a semi-structured set of questions that encouraged reflection on institutional conditions affecting the retention of the students. The FGD sessions were recorded both manually and digitally. Then the transcription of the record was generated and analysed by creating the themes.

Results and Discussions

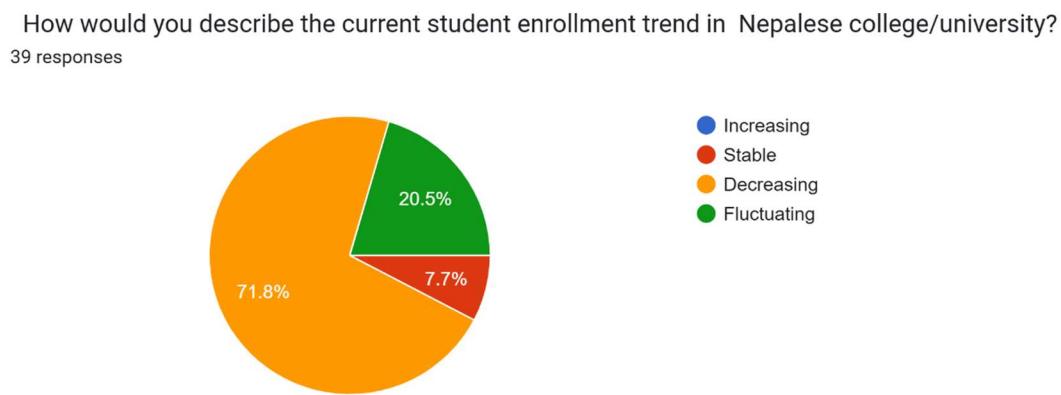
The study aimed to find out the causes of student dropout and devise a solution to the issue. Based on the survey data collected from forty teachers and the focus group discussion with ten teachers, the following results have been derived.

Students Enrolment Status

The informants were asked about the current trends of student enrollment, and the following table represents the information collected from the informants.

Figure 1

Student enrollment trend

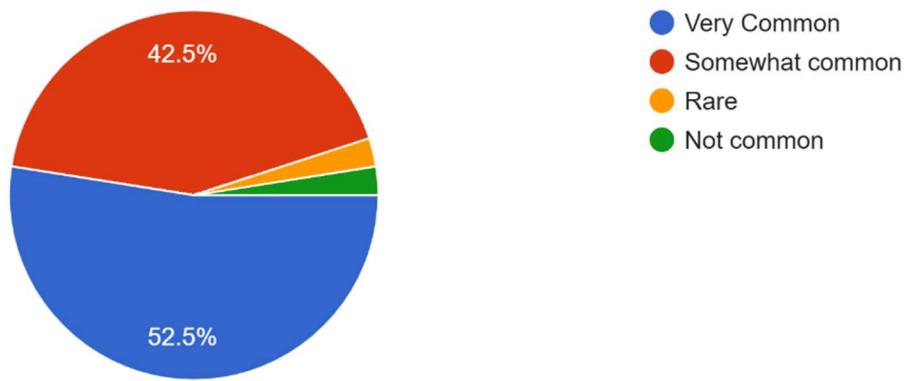


In response to the questions to determine whether the rate of students' enrollment has been going, the responses show that 71.8 percent have reported that it is decreasing, 20.5 percent mentioned that it is fluctuating, and 7.7 percent mentioned that it is stable. So, from this data, it can be claimed that the number of students showing interest in enrolling in a university-level degree has been decreasing.

Dropout Issue

The survey questions were intended to explore the issue related to student dropout, and the informants were asked how common the issue of student dropout is; the responses showed that dropout is very common in the institution where they teach.

Figure 2
Dropout situation

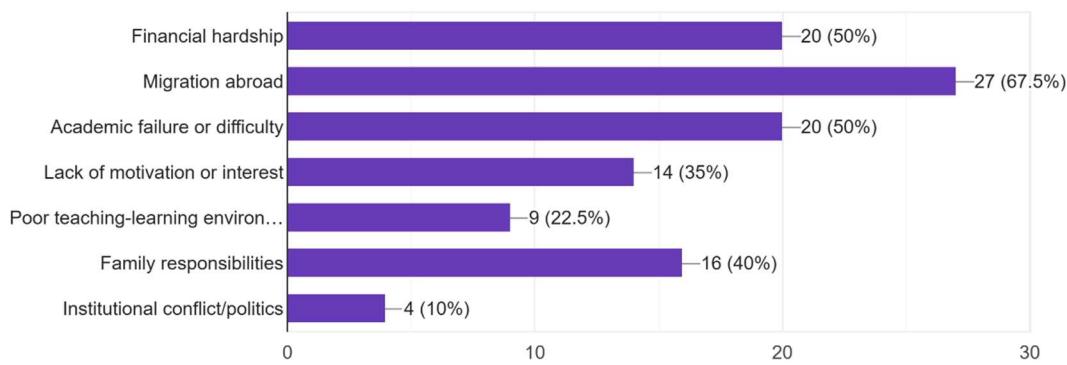


The figure above shows the issue of dropout, and it is reported that 52.5 percent of the participants have claimed that dropout is very common, and 42.5 percent have mentioned that it is somewhat familiar. It shows that the number of students enrolling in the particular program and dropping the course without completing is common and it is a growing phenomenon.

Reasons behind Dropout

To find out the most striking reasons for dropout, the informants are asked to select the reasons behind the dropout through multiple checkbox options, and the following table graph represents the findings regarding the causes of student dropout.

Figure 3
Reasons behind dropout



The data collected from 40 respondents shows that migration abroad is the most significant reason for student dropout at the university level in Nepal, reported by 67.5% of participants. This shows that many students leave their studies in search of better educational and empowerment opportunities overseas (Mulmi, 2024; Shrestha, 2023). The second most reported causes were financial hardship and academic failure or difficulty (Lorenzo-Quiles, Galdón-López, & Lendínez-Turón, 2023), each mentioned by 50% of respondents, suggesting that both economic constraints and academic challenges play an important role in discouraging students from completing their degrees. Additionally, family responsibilities were cited by 40% teachers as another contributing factor, reflecting how personal and household obligations affect students' continuity in higher education. Almost 35 % of respondents mentioned lack of motivation or interest as a reason for dropout, showing a need for higher academic engagement and support. Meanwhile, a poor teaching-learning environment is mentioned by 22.5% of respondents, and institutional conflict or politics is noted by only 10 % of informants as a reason for dropping the course. Overall, the findings indicate that student dropout in Nepalese universities is due to a combination of many factors that can be united as economic, academic, and social factors, with external migration emerging as the most dominant influence.

Based on the ideas generated from the Focused Group Discussion, the following reasons were identified as the causes behind the dropouts.

Mismatch between Students' Expectations and the College Environment

Students enroll in higher education with lots of high expectations they will get from the higher education institutions. This period is an excellent transition for the students; they get shifted from school education and feel proud to be a part of higher education. However, in contrast with their expectations, they do not get an appropriate environment and feel that their expectations are not met. During FGD, one of the participants [P2] expressed,

In the university, students get admission with lots of desires and wish to get knowledge and become capable of getting a job, but when they get involved in the environment, they become fed up with the political and other kinds of environment and decide to terminate their degree and search for other alternatives.....

From this statement, it can also be interpreted that there is a mismatch between students' expectations and the environment in the colleges. Most of the participants shared that due to the politics in the college, students become frustrated with the college environment. Students want to be independent and get knowledge to utilize it to sustain their life, but they do not see such certainty after completing their degree, and they decide to terminate their studies. This represents the primary cause of the students' dropout for Maloshonok, & Terentev, (2017) as well.

Heavy-loaded Course Content

Another cause of dropout was overloaded course content. Mainly in semester students, there are overly loaded courses that should be completed within 45 hours. Some of the participants said that the courses offered by the university cannot be finished within the given time, and teachers and students are constantly under pressure to complete the course. They do not think of maintaining the quality and focus on just completing the courses. In this context, [P 1] expressed, "Our students are

habituated to listening to the teachers; they do not engage in self-study. As a result, teachers have to complete the course by hook and crook." In this situation, students feel overloaded and cannot do well in preparation for their exam, which causes failure in the exam, and finally, students make the decision to leave the college. Some of the participants also shared that Nepalese universities design the courses with lots of theoretical content within a course, which students can not finish reading within the given time. Most of the participants suggested that students need to feel relaxed during their study rather than pressure, so that they can be motivated to complete their degree. The finding correlates with the findings generated by Borchers, Xu, and Pardos (2025).

Duration of the Academic Degree

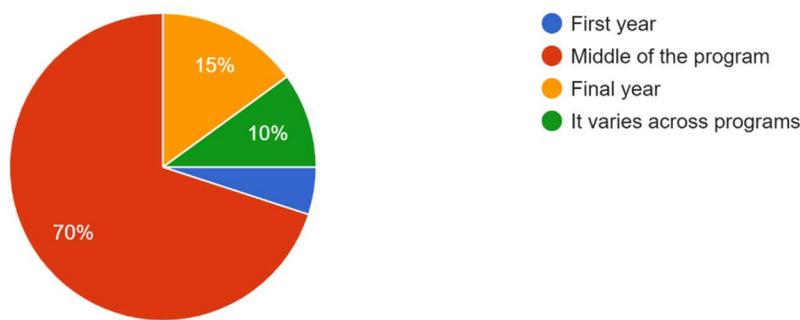
In the context of Nepal, undergraduate degrees are of four years, which are equivalent to the world standard, but the main problem was the time or duration students spend completing the degree. If we see the general tendency of Nepalese universities, students spend five to six years to complete their four-year degree. After the intermediate or school degree, students again need to engage in their studies without getting time to earn money to manage their study expenses. In this context, [P3] said, " Students will not be self-dependent after adult age and earn money to manage all the expenses of themselves, but this is not possible in our context." In contrast to this expectation, students do not get the opportunity to earn money, which forces them to take alternative options in their lives. They think that spending six years in their study is a waste of time because the theoretical education they have received will not be helpful in making money in their life. Some of the participants suggested that the four-year courses should be completed within four years, so that students will be engaged in other kinds of life-sustaining activities. So, considering the above expressions of the participants, it can be said that the duration of completing their academic degree is the leading cause of dropout. The finding aligns with Lorenzo-Quiles, Galdón-López, and Lendínez-Turón (2023), who claimed that if the courses last longer, the students attempt to drop the courses, and the dropout rate goes higher.

Dropout Stage

The participants were asked about the stage at which dropouts mostly occur, and the findings suggested the following results.

Figure 4

Dropout stage



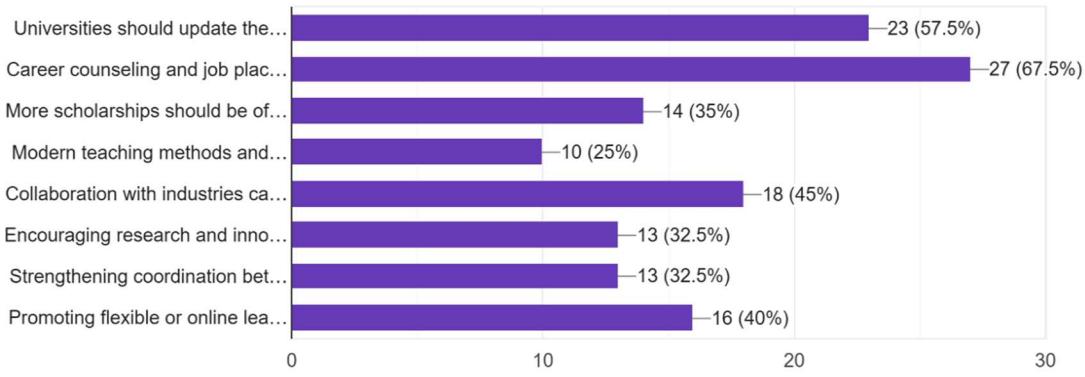
The above pie chart shows that 70 % of participants reported that the dropout is most likely to occur in the middle of the program. Similarly, 15 % participants have reported that dropout occurs in the final year of the degree. However, a surprising 5% of participants have reported that dropouts even occur in the first year.

Solutions to Dropout

The informants were requested to respond to the suggestions that can lead to reducing the dropout in the university, and the following graph represents the findings based on the responses.

Figure 5

Solutions to dropout



The data show that teachers view several strategies as effective in reducing dropout rates at the university level in Nepal. The majority of respondents, i.e., 67.5% agreed that career counseling and job placement support are crucial in attracting and retaining students (Borchers, Xu, & Pardos 2025) showing a strong belief in the need to connect education with job opportunities. Similarly, 57.5% of participants emphasized the importance of regular curriculum updates, suggesting that academic programs must update the curriculum to the changing needs of students and the job market (Watermark Insights, 2023; Khatri, 2023). About 45% of respondents agreed that collaboration with industries can help maintain the student dropout rate. To make the university programs more practical and job oriented the institutions must collaborate with industries and factories. Similarly, 40% of the participants flexible or online learning options could make higher education more reachable to learners. Similarly, 35% of teachers noticed that scholarships and financial aid can help in reducing the dropouts in the institutions and 32.5% stressed the role of research and innovation culture, as well as better coordination between schools and universities in encouraging continuous learning. Overall, it can be concluded that to reduce the dropout rates in the higher education institutes the universities in Nepal should target career-relevance courses that generate better opportunity in the market in the future, curriculum modernization must be done keeping the technological advancement that take place in this growing era of technological development, financial support, and flexible learning opportunities.

Strategies to Reduce Dropout Rates in University

The results of the open-ended responses indicated that there is a close relationship between education and the market. If the degrees and the education we are attempting to impart can be connected to the market needs, it can be stopped. The majority of participants emphasized that professional development and placement opportunities should be closely linked to university degrees. The participants suggested that skill based and career focused programs should be introduced in the courses which leads students to develop actual, real world skills and prepare them for the workforce. Teachers argued for practice oriented, need-based professional courses that satisfy the needs of the global economy which emphasize the necessity of curricular change. The need of the programs like 'Learn and Earn' would enable students to obtain financial advantages and work experience as they pursue their education

The most important approach to retaining students is to provide financial aid along with scholarships and programs for job placement. The responses of the participants indicate that students need robust mentorship and counseling, which can support them in academic and emotional areas. Some of the participants have noted that this helps reduce uncertainty and dropout rates. Such efforts would involve revising regulations for higher education. Collaboration with businesses companies will help to improve pathways to employment for graduates. This could also help reduce brain drain.

The data has indicated the importance of enhancing teaching method and enhancing institutional dependability. In a similar vein, a few participants mentioned that there should be less political interference in academia is required to manage this issue. Additionally, the respondents recommended efforts to increase awareness and encouraging parents and students look for higher education back home. Instructional strategies and using flexible learning environments through online and blended learning seem to be beneficial for increasing student engagement. They focus to that higher education in Nepal should be linked to research, occupational skills and more general national development goals.

In conclusion, the study shows that weak links between education and employment are the main cause of declining student enrollment and rising university dropout rates in Nepal. According to the findings, colleges should provide learn-and-earn possibilities as well as skill-based, practical, and career-oriented programs backed by financial aid. Retention of students also depends on improving teaching quality, ensuring curriculum change, and fortifying counseling and mentoring programs. Furthermore, to strengthen institutional governance, generate employment opportunities, and advance high-quality, relevant, and skills-based higher education, universities, businesses, and the government must work together effectively.

Policy Reform as a Strategy to Reduce University Dropouts

The responses from participants reveal that policy reform is viewed as a critical and immediate need to address the challenges of decreasing student enrollment and rising dropout rates in Nepalese universities. Most of the teachers focus on the fact that current higher education laws and policies are not enough. A majority of teachers emphasize that the existing higher education policies are outdated and have failed to meet the current academic, professional, and socioeconomic needs of the students. They demanded the change of national education policy,

focusing on relevance, quality assurance, practical knowledge, and accountability within higher education institutions. One of the participants suggested that policy should emphasize life skill-based and vocational education, enabling students to develop practical competencies that directly support their employability.

The majority of the respondents emphasized the importance of need-based scholarships, financial support, and student support policies to ensure access and retention for learners. They also recommended that the government should increase funding for higher education to ensure accessible and balanced education and promote learn and earn programs that combine student and work opportunities. The participants also stressed the need for flexible academic structures such as a credit transfer system and part-time or online learning options to accommodate diverse needs and reduce dropouts.

Furthermore, respondents pointed out that universities should formulate policy to collaborate with industries and the private sector for job placement and internship opportunities, thereby connecting learning with employment. Policies should encourage students for career counseling, student mentorship, and awareness programs as an important factor for motivating students to continue their studies. Some participants called for the eradication of political influence in educational institutions and the establishment of a transparent, professional governance system. In conclusion, it can be inferred that policy reform must move beyond the structural changes and focus on creating an education system that is inclusive, market-oriented, and aligned with national development priorities. Strengthening institutional integrity, promoting research and innovation, and ensuring that education policies respond to the life situation and aspirations of youth are identified as key steps towards improving enrollment and reducing dropout rates in the Nepalese university sector.

Conclusion

Student dropout is a burning issue in higher education in Nepal. The study tried to explore the causes and solutions to students' dropout. As it is a pressing issue at present, the research was oriented to collect data from teachers who were teaching at the college level. The study collected data using both qualitative and quantitative data and analyzed them thematically and statistically.

From the above discussion, it was found that the most influential cause of student dropout is student migration to foreign countries after they have joined a course in Nepal. Many students are looking for opportunities, and after joining the university, they look for opportunities to go abroad. Similarly, financial hardship, academic difficulties, and family responsibilities emerge as primary reasons that push students to abandon their studies. The mismatch between students' expectations and the actual learning environment, heavy course load, and lengthy degree completion times also discourage them from continuing their education. These issues collectively point to weaknesses in how higher education connects to students' personal ambitions and the realities of the job market.

Teachers' responses in this study also show that dropout is not a sudden decision but a gradual process that often starts with loss of motivation and a sense of isolation from the system. Most dropouts occur during the mid-year when students face academic pressure and uncertainty about their future.

The study highlights the immediate need for systemic reform. Participants strongly believe that universities must update their curriculum according to the updated technology to make it more relevant, skill-oriented, and aligned with employment needs. Creating the link between the universities and industries can help students to remain in the program and ultimately complete the degree. Financial support programs and supporting the learner with a scholarship can also add beauty to retaining the students.

In conclusion, this study suggests that reducing dropout in Nepalese universities requires a holistic approach that addresses both academic and socioeconomic challenges. Education must be connected to employment based on practicality and supported by strong institutional and policy frameworks.

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