



Bachelor-Level Student Dropouts in Nepal: Causes and Strategies for Retention

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Abstract

Student attrition at the undergraduate level represents a critical institutional and socioeconomic challenge within the higher education landscape. This study investigates causes of college dropout, and strategies for their retention. This study adopted a narrative research design in which primary data were gathered from 10 college dropouts in the faculty of education in 2025, whereas secondary data were collected from books, and journal articles. The research findings revealed that undergraduate attrition was driven by an intersection of compounding factors, primarily severe financial constraints, rigid theoretical curricula, lacking practical market relevance, pedagogical disengagement, and a profound deficit in structured institutional support mechanisms like academic advising and career counseling. Psychologically, feelings of academic isolation and low self-esteem further accelerate student alienation. Based on these findings, this study concludes that mitigating student attrition requires a structural shift from reactive management to a holistic, student-centric retention ecosystem. This study is significant because it identifies the major causes of bachelor-level student dropouts in Nepal and provides evidence-based retention strategies to support policymakers, educational institutions, teachers, and other stakeholders in improving student persistence, reducing dropout rates, and enhancing the quality and equity of higher education.

Keywords: academic integration, bachelor's level, strategies for retention, secondary data, causes of student attrition

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of student attrition, commonly referred to as dropping out, represents a critical challenge within higher education ecosystems globally and specifically in developing nations like Nepal. A dropout student is academically defined as an individual who permanently vacates their enrolled educational institution prior to completing the prescribed curriculum, thereby failing to secure the intended diploma, degree, or formal certification. Examining



student dropout involves a systematic investigation into multi-dimensional student characteristics, institutional vulnerabilities, and socio-economic impediments that compel premature departure.

Globally, institutional and individual variables intersect to dictate higher education retention rates. Research commissioned for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation emphasized that non-completion is driven by a complex matrix of academic disengagement, economic strain, and compounding personal responsibilities (Yukselturk et al., 2014). Because student attrition is simultaneously catalyzed by personal vulnerabilities and structural failures, institutional interventions must target either individual behavioral modification or broader systemic restructuring to optimize student retention (Rumberger, 2001). Historically, theoretical frameworks such as Tinto's Student Integration Model have successfully mapped dropout risks by analyzing how background characteristics, academic integration, social alignment, and institutional commitment determine an adult student's decision to persist or withdraw (Sweet, 1986).

In the contemporary context of Nepal, low graduation rates and escalating dropout numbers pose a severe structural crisis for general university education. Every year, thousands of secondary schools graduates transition into higher education; however, a stark disparity remains between enrollment and completion rates. The University Grants Commission [UGC] (2021) reported that out of 466,828 students enrolled across 1,437 campuses under 11 universities and 4 medical institutions in Nepal, an overwhelming majority of 416,426 students (89.20%) were registered in Bachelor's level programs, compared to a mere 47,242 students (10.12%) at the Master's level. This significant statistical chasm underscores a systemic attrition issue during the undergraduate years, raising urgent questions regarding the academic survival and adaptation struggles faced by students at community and constituent campuses across the country (Parajuli, 2021).

1.1 Objective of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to investigate causes of college dropouts, and strategies for their retention in Nepal.

1.2 Research Question

What are the major causes of college dropouts, and what strategies can be adopted to improve student retention?

Student dropouts face heightened vulnerabilities including structural underemployment and suppressed lifetime earnings, which directly curtails national economic productivity and exacerbates societal inequalities. High attrition rates serve as an indicator of pedagogical and administrative deficits.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This study provides empirical diagnostics to help universities bridge operational gaps and redesign student-centric environments. Attrition disproportionately marginalizes vulnerable student demographics. Pinpointing these specific risk factors supports the creation of equitable policy frameworks to protect marginalized student cohorts. By establishing clear, predictable risk indicators, this research allows academic administrators to deploy timely intervention mechanism such as targeted counseling and financial aid before absolute student disengagement occurs.

2. Literature Review

The term "dropout" within higher education refers to the voluntary or involuntary withdrawal of students from an educational program prior to completing the prescribed requirements for graduation (Matschke et al., 2023). Understanding student attrition requires a multi-dimensional perspective, as it is deeply intertwined with systemic socioeconomic divides, institutional structures, and individual identities.

A primary institutional factor contributing to university attrition is the social-class achievement gap, particularly affecting first-generation college students. Matschke et al. (2023) demonstrated that first-generation students frequently exhibit lower academic performance compared to continuing-generation peers due to a perceived incompatibility between their social backgrounds and university identities. This cultural mismatch often manifests as student disidentification—a negative, internalized relation to the university community—which significantly increases the risk of premature withdrawal among students from lower social strata (Matschke et al., 2023).

Furthermore, student attrition patterns vary significantly across demographic cohorts, age groups, and institutional timeline phases. While foundational studies in secondary education highlight that early disengagement and disciplinary issues drive high dropout rates among younger cohorts (Stearns & Glennie, 2006), higher education attrition exhibits different temporal dynamics. Long-term longitudinal research indicates that the factors influencing college student dropout change substantially over a multi-year period (Ishitani & DesJardins, 2002). For instance, structural interventions like financial aid have a dynamic impact; student retention varies profoundly based not just on the availability of financial assistance, but on the exact timing and cumulative volume of the aid distributed (Ishitani & DesJardins, 2002).

Beyond macro-economic indicators, the micro-level dynamics of family environments play a critical role in academic persistence. Historically, research on family-related attrition focused heavily on structural variables such as overall socioeconomic status, parental educational attainment, and household income (Rumberger et al., 1990). However, the underlying behavioral mechanisms reveal that academic persistence is heavily dictated by parental involvement. Students who are left to make complex academic decisions in isolation, or whose families exhibit low engagement in their educational pathways, demonstrate a significantly higher propensity to drop out compared to peers with robust domestic support systems (Rumberger et al., 1990).

The landscape of higher education in Nepal shares structural similarities with other South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) nations, characterized by surging enrollment demands, a growing preference for global qualifications, and historically constrained domestic opportunities (Chauhan, 2008). Regionally, higher education is strained by low gross enrollment ratios, limited female participation, and national education expenditures that consistently fall below the UNESCO recommendation of 4% to 6% of the Gross National Product [GNP] (Chauhan, 2008; University Grants Commission [UGC], 2021). Within this regional context, student attrition at the Bachelor's level in Nepal has emerged as a critical institutional concern.

3. Methodology

This study employed a narrative research design. The research was based on the primary data collected from 10 college dropouts in the faculty of education through open-ended interview questionnaire in 2025. The secondary data were taken from books, and journal articles. Ethical standards were strictly followed by taking oral consent from the participants.

3.1 Views of the Participants

3.1.1 Views of the Participants on the Causes of Drop Out

The assertions of the ten participants reveal that bachelor-level student dropout in Nepal is a multifaceted phenomenon influenced by academic, financial, personal, psychological, institutional, and geographical factors. The participants consistently emphasized that dropout decisions are rarely the result of a single cause; rather, they emerge from the interaction of several challenges that gradually undermine students' ability and willingness to continue their studies.

The academic impediments, pedagogical disengagement, academic dealignment, and instructional challenges constitute significant educational barriers. Participants reported that difficulties in understanding course content, dissatisfaction with teaching methods, and limited classroom engagement reduce students' academic confidence and persistence (Participant 1, Participant 7). These views suggest that ineffective instructional practices and weak student engagement can contribute substantially to dropout decisions.

Financial difficulties emerged as one of the most dominant themes. Participants highlighted compounding financial constraints and broader socio-economic barriers as major obstacles to educational continuity (Participant 2, Participant 6). Their assertions indicate that the inability to afford tuition fees, educational materials, transportation, and living expenses places considerable pressure on students, particularly those from economically disadvantaged families. The participants also emphasized the role of personal and familial circumstances in shaping educational outcomes. Health-related issues, family problems, household responsibilities, and the need to engage in income-generating activities were identified as factors that interfere with students' academic commitments and increase the likelihood of withdrawal from college (Participant 3, Participant 10). Institutional factors were also identified as important contributors to student attrition. Participants noted that deficits in institutional guidance and mentorship leave many students without adequate academic counseling, emotional support, and career guidance (Participant 4). Psychological factors emerged as another significant theme. Feelings of alienation, stress, anxiety, loneliness, and emotional vulnerability were reported as factors that negatively affect students' educational experiences and persistence (Participant 5). These assertions suggest that psychological well-being is closely associated with student retention and that emotional challenges can substantially weaken students' commitment to higher education.

Furthermore, diminished academic motivation was identified as a key factor influencing dropout decisions. According to one participant, declining interest in studies and reduced engagement with academic activities often lead students to abandon their educational pursuits (Participant 8).

The participants also drew attention to geographical and quality disparities in higher education. Students from remote and underserved areas frequently encounter limited access to quality educational resources, infrastructure, and learning opportunities, which places them at a disadvantage compared to their urban counterparts (Participant 9). This finding indicates that structural inequalities in educational provision contribute to dropout rates among bachelor-level students.

The participants' assertions demonstrate that bachelor-level student dropout in Nepal is a complex issue resulting from the interplay of academic, financial, institutional, psychological, personal, and geographical challenges.

3.1.2 Views of the Participants on Strategies for Retention

Most participants emphasized that improving the curriculum and adopting student-centered teaching methods are essential for reducing student dropout. They suggested making the curriculum more practical, relevant to the job market, flexible, and engaging while encouraging interactive teaching and continuous assessment.

Participants highlighted that financial hardship is one of the principal reasons for student dropout. They recommended establishing comprehensive financial support systems, including scholarships, tuition waivers, emergency financial aid, work-study opportunities, installment payment schemes, and transportation support to ensure that economically disadvantaged students can continue their studies (Participant 1; Participant 2; Participant 4; Participant).

The majority of participants stressed the importance of developing structured academic advising and mentoring systems. They suggested assigning academic advisors, strengthening faculty-student communication, implementing early warning systems for at-risk students, and providing regular academic and career counseling throughout students' academic journey (Participant 3; Participant 5; Participant 6).

Participants also identified psychosocial well-being as a critical factor influencing student retention. They recommended expanding counseling services, providing mental health awareness programs, establishing peer-support groups, organizing stress-management activities, and fostering an inclusive and supportive campus environment that promotes students' emotional well-being (Participant 7; Participant 8; Participant 9; Participant 10).

The participants' responses indicate that student retention depends not only on students' personal commitment but also on the relevance and quality of the educational experience provided by higher education institutions. Traditional lecture-based instruction and outdated curricula may reduce students' motivation and engagement, increasing the likelihood of dropout. The participants viewed practical, career-oriented, and learner-centered curricula as mechanisms for enhancing students' academic interest and perceived value of higher education. Interactive pedagogical practices, such as collaborative learning, project-based instruction, continuous assessment, and experiential learning, are likely to strengthen students' academic engagement, improve learning outcomes, and foster stronger institutional attachment. Therefore, curriculum and pedagogical reforms can be interpreted as proactive institutional strategies that address academic dissatisfaction while increasing students' motivation to persist until graduation.

The participants perceived effective academic advising as a fundamental retention mechanism that supports students throughout their educational journey. Many students encounter academic difficulties, uncertainty regarding career goals, or challenges in adapting to university life without receiving timely guidance. Structured advising systems involving faculty mentors, academic counselors, and early identification of academically vulnerable students can provide personalized academic assistance before problems become severe. Regular communication between advisors and students also strengthens students' sense of belonging and institutional commitment. These findings indicate that institutionalized advising networks function both as preventive and supportive interventions that facilitate academic success while reducing the likelihood of student withdrawal.

The participants' perspectives suggest that bachelor-level student retention in Nepal requires a comprehensive institutional strategy that simultaneously addresses academic, financial, social, and psychological dimensions of student life. Curriculum and pedagogical reforms enhance learning engagement; targeted financial assistance removes economic barriers; institutionalized advising networks provide continuous academic guidance; and

psychosocial and mental health support strengthens students' emotional resilience. Together, these interconnected strategies create an enabling educational environment that improves student satisfaction, promotes academic success, and significantly reduces the likelihood of student dropout. Such a multidimensional retention framework highlights that sustaining student enrollment requires coordinated institutional policies rather than isolated interventions.

4. Major Findings

The findings reveal that bachelor-level student dropout in Nepal is a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by the interaction of academic, financial, personal, psychological, institutional, and geographical factors rather than a single cause. The participants identified academic challenges, ineffective teaching practices, financial hardship, family responsibilities, health issues, inadequate institutional guidance, psychological distress, declining academic motivation, and disparities in access to quality education as the major contributors to student attrition. These interconnected factors collectively undermine students' academic engagement, persistence, and ability to complete their studies. Overall, the findings suggest that reducing bachelor-level student dropout requires comprehensive retention strategies that strengthen instructional quality, expand financial assistance, enhance academic advising and psychosocial support, foster student motivation, and ensure equitable access to higher education opportunities.

The findings reveal that bachelor-level student retention in Nepal can be strengthened through integrated institutional strategies that address academic, financial, advisory, and psychosocial needs. The participants emphasized the importance of curriculum and pedagogical reforms that promote student-centered, practical, and engaging learning experiences; comprehensive financial assistance to alleviate economic barriers; institutionalized academic advising and mentoring to provide continuous guidance; and psychosocial and mental health support to enhance students' emotional well-being and resilience. Collectively, these interconnected strategies improve academic engagement, student satisfaction, institutional attachment, and persistence, suggesting that a holistic and coordinated approach is essential for reducing student dropout and promoting successful degree completion.

The interview findings further reveal that academic performance alone does not determine student persistence; students' psychological well-being also plays a vital role. Participants acknowledged that stress, anxiety, depression, loneliness, family pressures, and adjustment difficulties often undermine students' motivation and academic engagement. Accessible counseling services, mental health awareness initiatives, peer-support networks, and inclusive campus environments can help students develop resilience and cope effectively with personal and academic challenges. These findings suggest that higher education institutions should adopt a holistic approach to student retention by addressing both academic and psychological needs. Promoting students' mental well-being contributes to stronger emotional attachment to the institution, improved academic performance, and increased persistence toward degree completion.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study corroborate and extend several foundational frameworks regarding higher education attrition. The academic and psychological alienation reported by the participants strongly aligns with Tinto's Student Integration Model (as cited in Sweet, 1986), which establishes that a student's decision to persist depends heavily on their successful academic and social integration into the institution. When campuses fail to provide adequate

mentorship and inclusive learning environments, student commitment drops, mirroring the disidentification trends noted by Matschke et al. (2023).

Furthermore, the severe financial barriers identified in this research confirm the longitudinal assertions made by Ishitani and DesJardins (2002). Attrition among undergraduate students in Nepal is heavily dictated by immediate economic shocks. Without strategically timed financial aid or institutional cushions, lower-income and first-generation students are disproportionately pushed out of the university system, widening the socioeconomic achievement gap discussed by Matschke et al. (2023). This systemic vulnerability highlights that higher education in Nepal is still suffering from the structural underfunding and substandard support ecosystems historically observed across SAARC nations by Chauhan (2008).

6. Conclusions

This study systematically investigates the multi-dimensional dynamics of undergraduate student attrition at the Bachelor's level in Nepal, focusing on the root causes and potential mitigation frameworks. Based on the empirical findings and theoretical analysis, it is concluded that undergraduate dropout is not merely an isolated individual failure, but a structural consequence of intersecting socioeconomic, pedagogical, and institutional deficits. Socioeconomically, immediate financial shocks and the rising costs of urban higher education represent the most critical push factors, disproportionately forcing students from lower-income brackets to abandon their academic goals for immediate employment. Pedagogically, the rigid and highly theoretical curriculum, paired with outdated instructional practices, fails to engage students, creating a profound sense of academic misalignment and diminished motivation. Institutionally, the complete lack of structured support mechanisms such as comprehensive career counseling, academic advising, and targeted mental health service leaves vulnerable students alienated when navigating academic or personal crises. Ultimately, dropping out results in severe, long-term consequences, including lost educational opportunities, depressed lifetime earning potential, and deep psychological distress. However, while attrition poses a significant systemic setback, it can be mitigated. Attrition prevention requires a shift from a reactive institutional approach to a holistic, student-centric retention ecosystem.

7. Recommendations

- Higher education institutions should shift to student-centered, interactive, and practice-oriented pedagogies.
- Institutions should implement flexible learning pathways, including part-time, hybrid, and online study options.
- Policymakers should expand need-based scholarships, tuition waivers, and targeted financial aid for disadvantaged students.
- Campuses should establish counseling services, mentorship programs, and structured career guidance systems.
- Authorities should develop re-entry mechanisms and promote vocational and skill-based alternative education pathways for dropouts.

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