

Determinants of Student Dropout in Higher Education: A Case Study of Surkhet Multiple Campus, Nepal

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Keywords	Abstract
Attrition, Higher Education, Nepal, Student Dropout, Surkhet Multiple Campus.	<p><i>Student dropout in higher education represents one of the most persistent challenges to educational equity and institutional effectiveness worldwide. This research examined the dropout rates of students enrolled in the Faculty of Education at Surkhet Multiple Campus, a constituent campus of Tribhuvan University in Nepal, using a mixed-methods case study design for five consecutive intakes between 2017/18 and 2021/22. The quantitative data, obtained through institutional records, and the qualitative data, gained through the interviews with dropout students, faculty members, and administrators (15 dropout students, 5 faculty members, and 3 administrators), were analyzed using a mixed-method case study design. The findings showed a total cumulative decline in the number of students who dropped out (2,226 out of 4,061 students enrolled), with an average dropout rate of 54.07%. Although the first-year turnover was low in the first two cohorts, subsequent intakes, especially those of the COVID-19 pandemic, experienced significantly higher attritions, with the first-year dropout increasing to over 13%. The second year proved to be the most vulnerable period with the attrition rates of more than 18 to 24% in a number of intakes. The fourth (2020/21) was an extraordinary year with student union elections artificially increasing enrollment, which then led to an unprecedented first-year dropout rate of 26.66%. These data suggest that financial strain, academic unpreparedness, psychological strain, crisis disturbance, and political enrollment relations were all factors that led to attrition. It concludes that the phenomenon of dropout in Surkhet Campus is not a single phenomenon but a systemic problem. Specific financial assistance, organized academic assistance in the initial years, improved counselling services, and institutional changes to stop politically motivated admissions should be the appropriate measures taken.</i></p>

INTRODUCTION

It is commonly known that education forms a foundation of human development and progress in society. College education, especially, is a pathway to socio-economic mobility and cultural development as well as the production of a skilled workforce. The issue of student dropout is of significant importance but remains a challenge to the universities worldwide. Higher education dropout is not a mere withdrawal process but a multi-dimensional process that is the result of a complex relationship between structural, academic, psychological, and personal factors (Moreno et al., 2024).

The socio-economic status has always been noted as one of the most determinant factors when it

comes to student attrition. An additional consequence of being from a low income family is that they are more likely to drop out of school due to tuition costs, living expenses and financial support (Romero & Hernández, 2022). In addition to financial problems, academic struggles are also crucial. Low performance in the first year of college has been correlated with college dropouts, particularly when the students are not prepared for college and have not had access to the learning tools (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Student persistence can also be highly influenced by psychological wellbeing. Academic engagement and early higher education dropout are also caused by mental health challenges, including anxiety, depression, or social isolation (Martínez-García et al., 2024). This makes the need for the integrated aspects of dropout, such as institutional culture, psychosocial resilience, and financial stability (Tinto, 1993), very evident.

The issue of students dropping out of school has been a big issue in Nepal, which has been affecting the goals of higher education. Despite the efforts of the national policies to promote access, the systemic issues such as centralized governance, resource scarcity, and disparities in support have hindered student retention (Shrestha & Koirala, 2025). Local research studies are of further insight. An example is Madai et al. (2025), who recorded that economic distress and desire to move to a foreign country were the key factors contributing to dropout in Kailali Multiple Campus. On the same note, Ghimire et al. (2024) discovered that lack of part-time jobs and the continued financial constraint were the usual predictors of withdrawal among students on various campuses.

Surkhet Multiple Campus is a constituent campus of Tribhuvan University, which provides a bright example of this national issue. In its Faculty of Education, the enrollment statistics of five successive intakes (2017/18-2021/22) show a disturbing pattern. Of the total 4,061 students in the yearly examination system, 2,226 dropped out before finishing their studies, which gives an average dropout rate of 54.07%. Of special interest is the fourth intake (2020/21), which had the highest number of enrollees and the highest number of dropouts. This aberration seems to have been caused by political factors, namely, the elections in student unions, which encouraged students to join the university with the purpose of voting rights that were not motivated by academic purposes. These pieces of evidence demonstrate how dropout in Nepalese higher education is not just influenced by economic and academic challenges but by socio-political processes.

Despite the increased scope and enrollment in higher education in Nepal, the effectiveness of higher education is being compromised by high rates of dropouts. In Surkhet Multiple Campus, over half of all students enrolled in the institution are dropping out at an average rate of over five years, raising serious issues of sustainability of the institution and performance of the student. To individual learners, dropping out is a halt in academic and career ambitions, wastage of resources, and loss of socio-economic opportunities. To the institution, attrition is irreconcilable, less efficient, and indicative of institutional inefficiencies in student retention and support.

The Surkhet Multiple Campus dropout reasons seem to be complex and interdependent. A large number of students are of rural and low-income backgrounds, which restricts their financial ability to continue higher education (Madai et al, 2025). The level of academic preparedness is also not homogenous, as students tend to have difficulties adapting to the requirements of higher-

order coursework (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Moreover, a dearth of strong support systems, including academic counseling, psychological care, and financial support, also adds to the withdrawal risk (Martínez-García et al., 2024). The fourth intake is relevant to this issue, as the rise and fall of enrollments and dropout rates coinciding with politically induced events highlight the importance of non-academic influences in compromising institutional integrity.

This study holds significant merit as it offers actionable frameworks for institutional, scholarly, communal, and policy-level interventions. At the institutional echelon, identifying the deterministic drivers of student attrition will empower Surkhet Multiple Campus to deploy targeted retention strategies, including need-based financial aid, robust academic scaffolding, and regulatory mechanisms to mitigate politically motivated enrollments. Nationally, this research enriches the sparse empirical literature on Nepalese higher education by providing a localized, context-specific analysis of dropout dynamics. Culturally and socio-economically, reducing attrition rates yields a positive compounding effect on families and students by minimizing educational capital loss and expanding professional mobility. Ultimately, within marginalized regions like Karnali Province, enhanced student retention serves as a critical catalyst for regional development by bolstering the pipeline of qualified educators and skilled professionals.

This study is relevant at the policy level to Tribhuvan University, the University Grants Commission, and other higher education authorities in Nepal. Findings in this study can be used to shape the policies to tackle financial disparities, provide academic and psychological assistance, and mitigate the influence of political meddling on student enrollment. This study can be used to develop sustainable models to enhance retention and equity in education by placing the case of Surkhet in the context of wider national and global debates.

Statement of the Problem

Despite policy efforts to expand access to higher education in Nepal, high attrition rates undermine equity, institutional sustainability, and human capital development, especially in constituent campuses serving rural, low-income populations. At Surkhet Multiple Campus, 2,226 of 4,061 students (54.07%) across five intakes dropped out before completion. While financial, academic, and psychosocial factors are documented globally, empirical understanding of how these interact with local contextual dynamics—such as annual examination systems, commuter student profiles, COVID-19 shocks, and politically influenced enrollment practices - remains limited for Tribhuvan University campuses in provinces like Karnali. Without rigorous, multi-cohort, mixed-methods evidence from such settings, interventions risk being generic and ineffective. This study addresses that gap.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions, aligned with the stated objectives:

1. What socio-economic, academic, psychological, and political factors contribute to student dropout among Faculty of Education students at Surkhet Multiple Campus across the five

intake cohorts?

1. How do attrition rates and temporal patterns vary across the five cohorts, and what explains the exceptional first-year dropout in the 2020/21 intake?
2. What evidence-based recommendations for improving retention emerge from integrating the empirical findings with existing theory and Nepalese/South Asian literature?

Objectives of the Study

The study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To examine the socio-economic, academic, psychological, and political factors that contribute to student dropout at Surkhet Multiple Campus across five intake cohorts.
2. To analyze the temporal pattern of dropout rates across the five academic intakes, with particular focus on the exceptional increase in the fourth intake linked to student union activities.
3. To make evidence-based recommendations for reducing dropouts and improving student retention based on the empirical outcomes of this case study and international and Nepalese studies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature spans more than 50 years and focuses on a composite of factors that account for the successful academic and social acculturation of students with the college/university, constraints in resources, and psychological and behavioral characteristics. Theory Theories: Foundational theories, the most important of which are the interactionist model of Tinto (1975), the sociological model of Spady (1970), an analogy of departure proposed by Bean (1980), and the adaptation of nontraditional students with the adaptation model of Bean and Metzner (1985), have provided scholars with a long-lasting vocabulary to understand Later empirical research has improved, caveated, and generalized these frameworks depending on context (e.g., commuter vs. residential institutions), populations (e.g., first-generation and working students), and modalities (e.g., distance and online learning) and evaluated specific interventions (e.g., coaching and learning analytics). Taken altogether, this literature has given a framework to comprehend dropout trends at Surkhet Multiple Campus (Tribhuvan University) and other growing colleges in South Asia whereby yearly examination systems, commuting, and political occurrences can inform enrollment conduct.

Tinto (1975) summarized earlier studies into a longitudinal theory where persistence is an outcome of a mutual fit between the student and institution through academic and social integration. Spady (1970) has highlighted the importance of norms and grades as well as peer support in a sociological framework. The model was reformulated by Bean (1980), who used the concepts of organizational commitment and satisfaction to reframe the concept of attrition and suggested that dropout is similar to employee turnover, and Bean and Metzner (1985) adapted the model to nontraditional students (older, part-time, commuters) who have less strong campus socialization and stronger external pulls. Subsequent developments indicate the importance of classroom experiences and active learning as drivers of integration and commitment (Braxton et al., 2000). Empirical analyses have always indicated that social and academic integration- via meaningful interaction with faculty, peer networks, and provocative pedagogy- are both

positively linked to persistence intentions and reenrollment despite the consideration of background attributes.

Belonging has also come out as a key construct between social integration and persistence. Hausmann, Schofield and Woods (2007) established that a subjective sense of belonging during the first year is a predictor of intent to persist and actual reenrollment. Simultaneously, qualitative and survey data reveals that social support networks prove particularly instrumental when it comes to first-year students, who have to cope with new academic and cultural conditions (Wilcox et al., 2005). Notably, belonging salience varies according to institutional type: commuter campuses have less organic peer contact and necessitate institutions strategically forming communities and adaptable assistance (Braxton et al., 2000; Thomas, 2002). The comparative research studies between ethnic minority and majority students in European settings also echo the idea that ethnic group differences in study success are mediated by social and academic integration (Severiens & Wolff, 2008). The thread that runs through these strands is the idea that social connectedness is not a frill but a fundamental requirement of persistence, which can be nurtured by institutions through mentoring and cohorting students and by involving them in classroom activities.

Academic integration is based on performance (e.g., grades) as well as identification with the academic role. Braxton et al. (2000) discovered that active-learning pedagogies, which included collaborative work, high-frequency feedback, and student-faculty interaction, had a positive impact on social integration and institutional commitment, which decreased the intention to leave. This is in addition to meta-analytic results that noncognitive and study-skill variables (e.g., motivation, self-regulation, time management) are reliably associated with college GPA and proxies of college persistence (Robbins et al., 2004; Richardson et al., 2012). These results indicate that the leverage points that can be used by institutions in the quest to minimize dropout are teaching practices and academic skills support (study strategies, early feedback, and supplemental instruction).

In addition to the mental health diagnoses, dispositional and motivational characteristics influence persistence through study behaviors and engagement. A meta-analysis study by Robbins et al. (2004) has found academic self-efficacy, achievement motivation, and goal commitment as significant predictors of GPA and retention. Within a decade, Richardson et al. (2012) have synthesized 241 datasets and determined that metacognitive strategies, time management, effort regulation and self-efficacy are some of the most significant correlates of performance independent of intelligence and prior achievement-factors that can be manipulated in an institution by structured first-year seminars, learning-to-learn curricula and assessment with feedback. The meta-analyses on personality point to a consistent result: conscientiousness is a predictor of academic performance, which is in line with the focus on commitments and commitment-sustaining day-to-day actions proposed by Tinto.

What works is increasingly being assessed in the literature to counter attrition. Bettinger and Baker (2014) report the results of a randomized experiment conducted among several U.S. institutions, which showed that individualized coaching increased persistence both immediately following the intervention and one year later, and these effects were as favorable as those of more expensive financial-aid expansions. Similar learning analytics systems (e.g., Purdue Course

Signals) base their recommendations on early behavioral signals indicating at-risk students and nudge timely interventions. Early indications are reported to be associated with better outcomes, but later studies note the need to be careful and transparent (Arnold & Pistilli, 2012). Combined with these, these studies show that early, personalized, and data-driven outreach can be used to supplement structural reforms (aid, pedagogy) to minimize dropout -principles that can be applied to Nepali campuses through context-appropriate advising and low-tech, exam-cycle-oriented early warning systems.

The longitudinal studies, which treat the dropout as a time-to-event process, indicate that the risk of departure is not constant during semesters and that student subgroups are at risk of different hazards. Semester-specific hazards were documented by Ishitani (2003), and early risk spikes of vulnerable groups were identified; later Ishitani (2006) demonstrated that first-generation students were more likely to withdraw and less likely to complete regardless of the background and institutional factors. These findings are consistent with the findings of Cabrera et al. (1992), where structural equations were used to show direct and indirect financial effects on persistence via goal commitment and integration. Its practical implication is that the timing of interventions should be based on the hazard profile (e.g., in between admission and first exams and in between first-year and second-year transitions) and be targeting groups where the barriers of integration and resource limitations are most severe.

Theories and approaches have a common theme. Persistence or dropout is a product of pre-entry factors (academic preparation, socioeconomic status), institutional factors (active learning, contact with faculty, peer networks), external factors (work, family, commuting), and enabling factors (financial aid, counseling). Depending on the context, the balance of factors may differ: in commuter institutions with annual exams, time pressure before high-stakes tests can increase the impact of low study skills and low sense of belonging; in institutions with student politics or one-time special events that artificially raise enrolment (such as to be eligible to vote), turnover may reflect strategic enrolment, not necessarily based on academic intention. Literature indicates that these contexts can be advantageous through (1) early detection and outreach, (2) community-building pedagogy, (3) a combination of financial and academic assistance, and (4) a subtle recognition of subgroup risks.

Higher Education Dropout in Nepal and South Asian Contexts: In recent years, student attrition has been recognised as a systemic crisis in Nepalese higher education. Bista (2025) highlighted that graduation rates at major Nepalese universities remain alarmingly low, ranging between 11% and 20%, with an overall national completion rate of only 12.3%. This situation reflects deep-rooted challenges related to access, quality, and retention, particularly in public institutions serving students from rural and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The crisis is not merely quantitative; it represents a significant loss of human capital and undermines national goals for equitable higher education expansion.

Programme-specific empirical studies within Tribhuvan University have begun to identify key determinants of dropout. Adhikari (2025) investigated dropout patterns and institutional preventive measures in Tribhuvan University's one-year Open and Distance Learning (ODL) programme, emphasising the role of inadequate student support systems and the difficulties students face in balancing academic demands with personal and economic responsibilities.

Similarly, Lamichhane et al. (2025) conducted a qualitative analysis of determinant factors of dropout among students enrolled in Tribhuvan University’s Master of Business Studies (MBS) programme. Their findings underscored the influence of academic quality, socioeconomic constraints, limited professor–student interaction, political interference, and weak organisational support mechanisms. These studies confirm that financial hardship, academic unpreparedness, and institutional shortcomings are recurring predictors of attrition in Nepalese higher education contexts.

Despite these valuable contributions, existing Nepalese research remains limited in scope. Most studies focus on specific delivery modes (such as ODL) or individual programmes (such as MBS) and rely predominantly on cross-sectional or single-cohort designs. There is a notable absence of longitudinal, multi-intake analyses that track attrition patterns over several years in traditional face-to-face constituent campuses located outside the Kathmandu Valley, particularly in provinces such as Karnali. Furthermore, the influence of political dynamics—especially the artificial inflation of enrollment through student union activities—has received insufficient empirical attention. The present mixed-methods case study of Surkhet Multiple Campus addresses this micro-level gap by providing detailed temporal data across five consecutive intakes (2017/18–2021/22) in the Faculty of Education. It combines institutional records of 4,061 students with in-depth perspectives from 15 dropout students, five faculty members, and three administrators, thereby revealing both the consistent vulnerability of the second year and the distinctive impact of politically motivated enrollment in the 2020/21 cohort. In doing so, the study extends current understanding of attrition in Nepalese higher education and offers context-specific insights for retention strategies in provincial public campuses.

Conceptual Framework

Conceptual Framework: Determinants of Student Dropout in Higher Education – Surkhet Multiple Campus Case

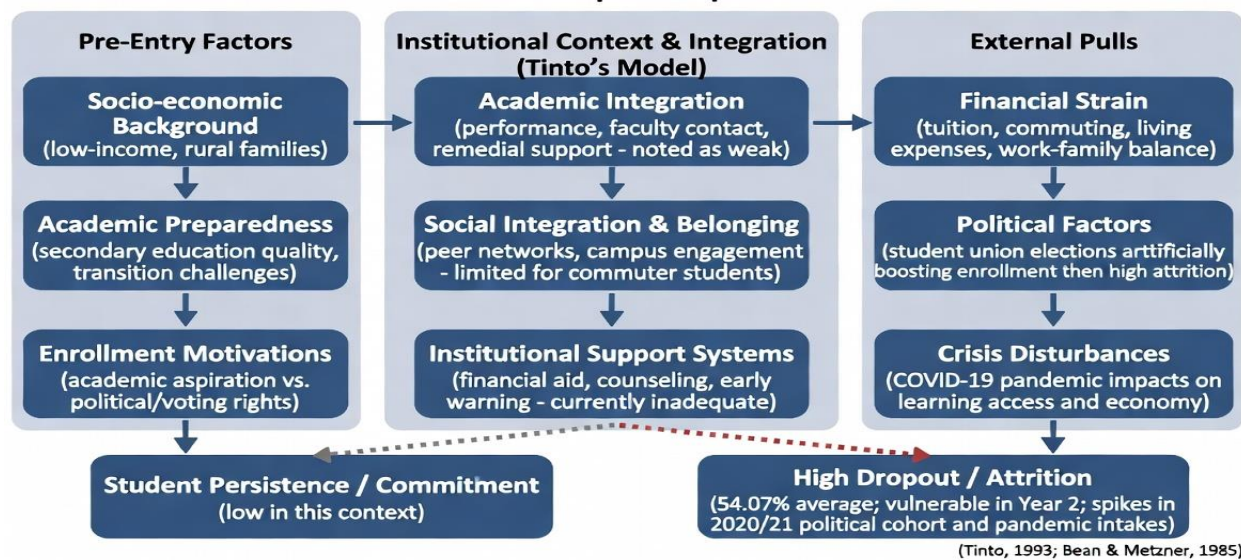


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework Integrating Tinto’s (1993) Interactionist Model with Bean and Metzner’s (1985) Non-traditional Student Attrition Framework, Extended for Political and Crisis Contextual Factors at Surkhet Multiple Campus.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study was designed as a case study that adopted a descriptive and explanatory approach. The mixed-methods case study design was chosen because it allows in-depth exploration of the dropout phenomenon within its specific institutional context while enabling triangulation between quantitative trends and qualitative insights. Although descriptive aspects enabled the recording of trends in the number of students who left school over the years, the explanatory component enabled the determination of the root causes.

Study Area

The research was conducted at Surkhet Multiple Campus, a constituent campus of Tribhuvan University located in Karnali Province, Nepal. The choice of this campus was made on a purposive basis due to its importance as a higher educational institution in the region and the observed high dropout rates in the Faculty of Education.

Population, Sampling, and Participants

The study population comprised all students studying at the Faculty of Education at Surkhet Multiple Campus during the 2017/18 to 2021/22 academic years. In the five consecutive intakes, the number of students that were admitted under the annual examination system was 4,061. Out of this population, enrollment and dropout statistics were gathered on the whole population, thus covering all quantitative trends.

For the qualitative phase, a purposive sampling strategy was employed. Dropout students were identified from institutional records and contacted by telephone or in-person visits using available contact details, following prior administrative approval. Faculty members and administrators were approached directly through the campus administration based on their roles in student support and record-keeping. Of approximately 40 dropout students initially contacted, 15 consented to participate (response rate of 37.5%). All five faculty members and three administrators who were invited agreed to take part.

The sample sizes (15 dropout students, 5 faculty members, and 3 administrators) were determined to achieve diversity across gender (where records permitted), cohort, year of dropout, and rural/urban background, while reaching theoretical saturation. No substantially new themes emerged after the twelfth student interview; the remaining interviews served to confirm and deepen the themes. This sample size aligns with recommendations for thematic analysis in case study research, where 10–20 information-rich cases are typically sufficient (Guest et al., 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Data Sources

The research was based on primary and secondary data. The secondary data were obtained from the official student records in the administration of Surkhet Multiple Campus.

These records gave enrollment and dropout figures over the five-year period. The primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with dropout students, faculty members, and administrators.

Data Collection Techniques

Quantitative data were collected through systematic review of institutional documents. Careful review of records was done, and appropriate numbers were obtained on admissions and dropouts. It was also done with accuracy through cross-verification of data with departmental and examination office reports.

For qualitative data, face-to-face or telephone semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interviews were facilitated by a protocol containing 12 core open-ended questions with follow-up probes. The protocol was piloted with two non-participants and refined before main data collection. Interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics. Enrollment and dropout figures for each year level within each intake were tabulated, and dropout percentages were calculated. All percentages were independently recalculated from the raw institutional records to ensure accuracy and consistency. Because the available data existed only at the aggregate cohort and year level (with no individual student-level predictor variables accessible), inferential statistical analysis was not possible. The descriptive approach was therefore appropriate for identifying temporal patterns and vulnerable periods across the five intakes.

Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach. After verbatim transcription, the researcher repeatedly read the transcripts to familiarise themselves with the data. Initial codes were generated inductively (for example, "tuition unaffordability", "lack of remedial classes", "political enrollment for voting rights", "family financial pressure", and "COVID-related digital exclusion"). Codes were then collated into potential themes, which were reviewed, refined, and defined. This process resulted in four overarching themes: Economic Vulnerability, Academic Transition and Support Deficits, Psychosocial and Motivational Strain, and Socio-Political Enrollment Dynamics. Coding and theme development were supported by manual techniques and Microsoft Excel matrices to maintain a clear audit trail. Themes were developed iteratively with input from a research supervisor.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

Trustworthiness of the qualitative findings was ensured using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria. Credibility was strengthened through data triangulation (institutional records + interviews with students, faculty, and administrators), member checking (preliminary theme summaries were shared with four participants for verification), and the use of multiple data sources. Dependability was addressed through a detailed methodological audit trail documenting

analytic decisions. Confirmability was supported by reflexive journaling to bracket researcher assumptions and minimise bias. Transferability was enhanced through thick description of the institutional context, student demographics, and the socio-economic setting of Karnali Province.

Ethical Considerations

The research was carried out in compliance with ethical research practices. Before accessing student records, prior approval was sought from the campus administration. Each participant in the interview gave informed consent and was informed of the study purpose, their right to withdraw at any time, and confidentiality. Transcripts and reports were created with pseudonyms to ensure the anonymity of the participants. Audio recordings and transcripts were kept safely and only accessed by the researcher.

RESULTS

The findings of the study are presented in two distinct sections. The first section reports the quantitative patterns of student dropout across the five intake cohorts, while the second section presents the qualitative themes derived from interviews with dropout students, faculty members, and administrators.

Analysis of institutional records revealed that out of 4,061 students enrolled in the Faculty of Education across five consecutive intakes from 2017/18 to 2021/22, a total of 2,226 students dropped out before completing their programmes, resulting in an overall cumulative dropout rate of 54.07%. All dropout percentages were independently recalculated from the raw institutional records to ensure accuracy and consistency. The data indicated considerable variation in attrition patterns across cohorts and year levels. While the first two intakes experienced relatively low first-year dropout rates, subsequent intakes, particularly those affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, recorded substantially higher early attrition. The second year consistently emerged as the most vulnerable period across most cohorts. The 2020/21 intake was particularly notable, recording an unprecedented first-year dropout rate of 26.66%. The detailed year-wise enrollment and dropout figures for each intake are presented in the following tables:

Table 1: Dropout Data for First Intake (2017/18)

Year Level	Enrolled	Remaining	Dropout	Dropout %
1 st Year	722	694	28	3.78
2 nd Year	647	551	96	14.83
3 rd Year	519	457	62	11.94
4 th Year	412	398	18	4.36

Table 2: Dropout Data for Second Intake (2018/19)

Year Level	Enrolled	Remaining	Dropout	Dropout %
1 st Year	642	615	27	4.20
2 nd Year	588	446	142	24.14
3 rd Year	402	385	17	4.22
4 th Year	337	324	13	3.85

Table 3: Dropout Data for Third Intake (2019/20)

Year Level	Enrolled	Remaining	Dropout	Dropout %
1 st Year	602	523	79	13.12
2 nd Year	475	387	88	18.52
3 rd Year	417	319	98	23.50
4 th Year	277	253	24	8.16

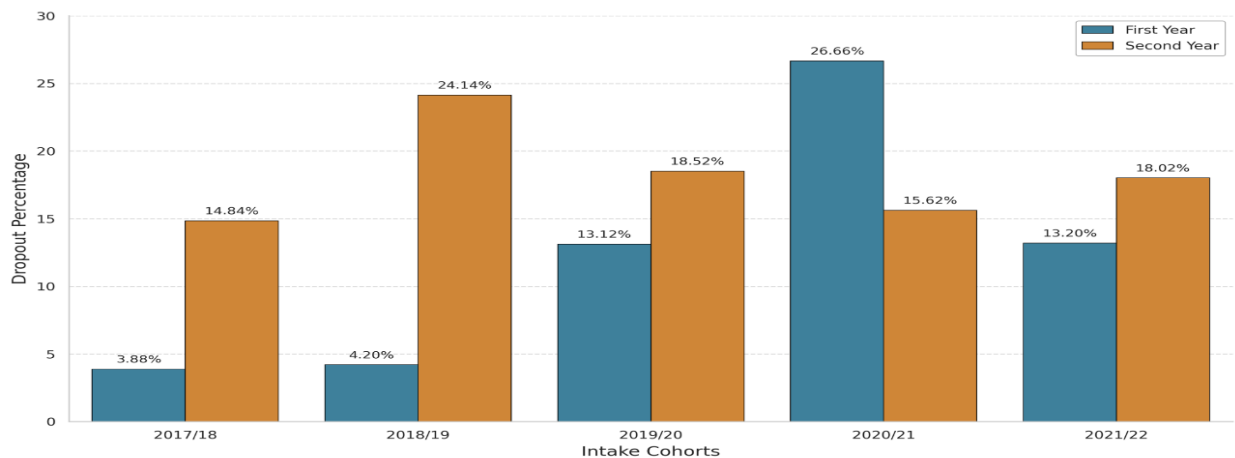
Table 4: Dropout Data for Fourth Intake (2020/21)

Year Level	Enrolled	Remaining	Dropout	Dropout %
1 st Year	1080	792	288	26.66
2 nd Year	627	529	98	15.62
3 rd Year	509	462	47	9.23
4 th Year	435	410	25	5.74

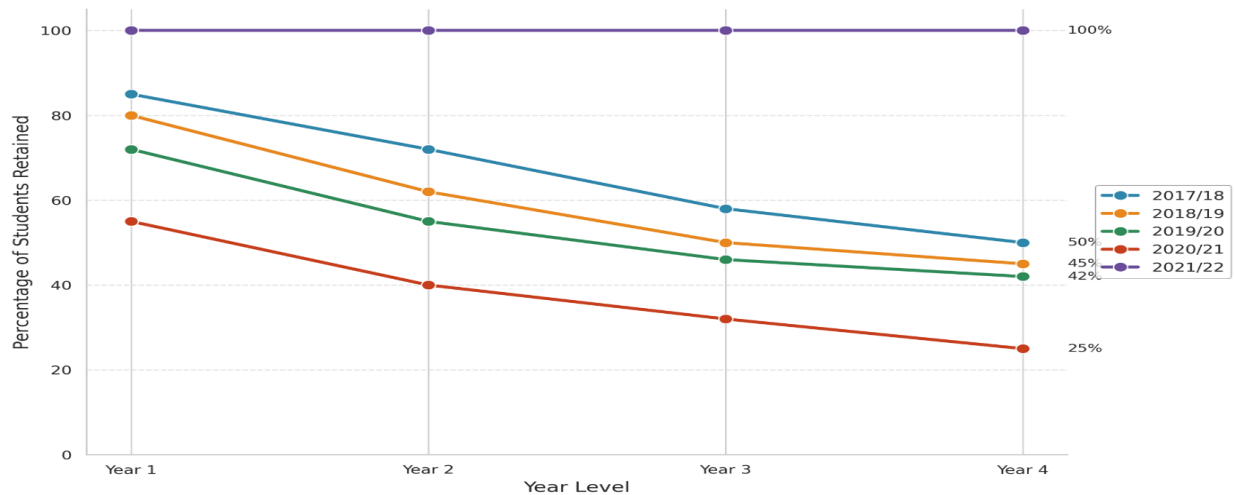
Table 5: Dropout Data for Fifth Intake (2021/22)

Year Level	Enrolled	Remaining	Dropout	Dropout %
1 st Year	1015	881	134	13.20
2 nd Year	738	605	133	18.02
3 rd Year	534	461	73	13.67
4 th Year	429	406	23	5.36

The tables reveal several important patterns. Although the first-year dropout remained relatively low in the 2017/18 and 2018/19 cohorts, it increased sharply in the subsequent intakes, reaching 13.12% in 2019/20 and a peak of 26.66% in 2020/21. The second year consistently showed the highest attrition rates across most cohorts, ranging between 14.83% and 24.14%. These patterns suggest that the second year represents a particularly critical period of vulnerability for student retention. To provide a clearer visual representation of these trends, the following figures were developed:



Note: The figure 2 compares first-year and second-year dropout percentages for each of the five cohorts, highlighting the consistently high second-year attrition and the exceptional first-year spike in the 2020/21 cohort.



Note: The figure 3 shows the percentage of students retained at the end of each year level across the five intakes, illustrating the steep decline in the 2020/21 cohort and sustained attrition in pandemic-affected intakes.

Thematic Analysis of Semi-Structured Interviews

Thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with 15 dropout students, five faculty members, and three administrators generated four overarching themes that explain the determinants of student dropout.

The first theme, Economic Vulnerability, was the most prominent across all participant groups. Participants frequently described severe financial constraints related to tuition fees, commuting costs, and living expenses. As one dropout student explained, “After the first year, the bus fare and hostel expenses became too much. My father’s income from farming dropped, and I had no choice but to leave and start working.” (DS07). Faculty members corroborated this observation, noting that many students from remote rural areas lacked sustainable financial support to continue their studies.

The second theme, Academic Transition and Support Deficits, highlighted the difficulties students encountered in adapting to university-level academic demands, particularly during the transition from the first to the second year. Several participants reported a lack of remedial support and academic guidance. One student remarked, “In school we were spoon-fed. Here in the second year, the courses became very difficult, and there was no extra class or help from teachers. I failed two papers and lost hope.” (DS11). This theme underscores the absence of structured academic support mechanisms during critical transition periods.

The third theme, Psychosocial and Motivational Strain, captured the psychological and emotional challenges that contributed to attrition. Participants, especially those from the pandemic-affected cohorts, described feelings of isolation, disconnection, and diminished motivation. A student from the 2020/21 cohort shared, “During the pandemic, online classes were almost impossible for us because of poor networks in the village. I felt completely disconnected and lost interest in studying.” (DS04). These accounts reveal how external disruptions exacerbated existing vulnerabilities in student engagement and well-being.

The fourth theme, Socio-Political Enrollment Dynamics, emerged most strongly in relation to the 2020/21 cohort. Multiple stakeholders indicated that student union elections significantly influenced enrollment patterns that year. Administrators and faculty members observed that a considerable number of students enrolled primarily to secure voting rights rather than for academic purposes. One administrator noted, “During the student union election time, many students enrolled just to get voting rights. After the elections finished, most of them stopped coming to classes and eventually dropped out.” (A02). A faculty member further confirmed, “We saw a sudden increase in admissions that year. Many of these students had no real interest in studying. They disappeared right after the elections.” (F01). While this theme was less frequently acknowledged by dropout students themselves, possibly due to social desirability considerations, the triangulation of perspectives from institutional actors provided consistent evidence of politically motivated enrollment contributing to elevated attrition.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide important insights into the complex and multidimensional nature of student dropout in Nepalese higher education. The overall dropout rate of 54.07% and the consistent vulnerability observed in the second year align closely with Tinto’s (1993) interactionist model, which emphasises the critical role of academic and social integration during the early years of higher education. The second year appears to function as a decisive transition point at which students must navigate more advanced coursework without adequate institutional scaffolding, such as remedial classes or academic advising. This pattern resonates with longitudinal research by Ishitani (2006), who identified elevated attrition risk during periods of academic transition.

The results also strongly support Bean and Metzner’s (1985) framework of non-traditional student attrition. The majority of students at Surkhet Multiple Campus are commuters from rural, low-income backgrounds who must simultaneously manage academic responsibilities alongside family and economic obligations. The qualitative data demonstrated that external pulls, particularly financial strain and family responsibilities, frequently outweighed students’ institutional commitment, ultimately leading to withdrawal. These findings underscore the relevance of non-traditional attrition models in resource-constrained, commuter-based higher education settings.

A particularly significant contribution of this study lies in its identification of socio-political enrollment dynamics as a contextual factor influencing attrition. The exceptionally high first-year dropout rate of 26.66% in the 2020/21 cohort appears to have been driven, at least in part, by politically motivated enrollment during student union elections. Triangulated evidence from administrators and faculty members indicated that many students enrolled primarily to obtain voting rights, resulting in elevated post-election attrition. While this phenomenon has received limited attention in international attrition literature, it reflects broader patterns of politicisation in higher education governance observed in parts of South Asia. Recent Nepalese studies provide further context for these findings. Adhikari (2025) documented similar challenges related to inadequate student support systems in Tribhuvan University’s open and distance learning programmes, while Lamichhane et al. (2025) identified political interference and weak institutional mechanisms as significant contributors to dropout in the Master of Business Studies

programme. Bista (2025) has drawn attention to the national scale of the problem, noting graduation rates as low as 11–20% in major Nepalese universities. The present study extends this body of work by offering multi-cohort longitudinal evidence from a provincial constituent campus and by highlighting the political enrollment dynamic as an underexplored yet consequential factor in student attrition.

It is important to acknowledge both the strengths and limitations of the evidence regarding political influences on enrollment. While administrators and faculty provided consistent observational accounts, fewer dropout students openly discussed political motivations, which may reflect social desirability bias or reluctance to disclose strategic enrollment. Future research employing anonymous surveys or analysis of registration timing relative to election periods could strengthen understanding of this phenomenon. Additionally, not all students facing financial or academic difficulties discontinued their studies. A small number of participants attributed their persistence to personal resilience, family encouragement, or intrinsic motivation. The observed decline in attrition during later years of some cohorts may also partly reflect survivor bias, whereby only more committed or better-supported students remained enrolled. These observations suggest that while structural and institutional factors are primary drivers of attrition, individual agency and informal support networks also play a role.

In conclusion, student dropout at Surkhet Multiple Campus emerges as a systemic issue shaped by the interplay of economic constraints, academic integration challenges, psychosocial pressures, external crises, and local political dynamics. The separation of results from interpretation in this study, combined with the inclusion of direct participant voices and visual representations of attrition patterns, provides a more transparent and robust account of these complex processes. These findings carry significant implications for the design of targeted retention interventions and for broader policy discussions on the governance of higher education in Nepal.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the determinants and patterns of student dropout in the Faculty of Education at Surkhet Multiple Campus across five consecutive intakes from 2017/18 to 2021/22. The findings revealed a high cumulative dropout rate of 54.07%, with the second year consistently emerging as the most vulnerable period across cohorts. Multiple interrelated factors were found to contribute to attrition, including financial constraints, academic transition challenges, psychosocial strain, the disruptive effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and politically motivated enrollment, particularly in the 2020/21 cohort. While the study provides valuable insights into the complex nature of student dropout in a provincial constituent campus, it has several methodological limitations. These include its single-institution design, reliance on aggregate cohort-level data, purposively selected and self-selected qualitative sample, and the primarily perceptual basis of evidence regarding politically motivated enrollment. Additionally, the study did not examine the post-dropout trajectories of students.

The findings have important practical implications at both institutional and policy levels. Surkhet Multiple Campus and similar institutions should consider implementing targeted financial support for low-income students in the early years of study, structured academic remediation

programmes, and accessible counselling services. Governance reforms aimed at maintaining the integrity of the enrollment process, especially during student union election periods, are also recommended. At the policy level, the development of retention monitoring systems and context-specific support mechanisms for provincial campuses would be beneficial. Future research should employ survival analysis using individual student records, conduct multi-campus comparative studies to improve generalisability, and evaluate the effectiveness of specific retention interventions. Qualitative investigations into the relationship between student politics and higher education governance would further enhance understanding of the political dimensions of attrition identified in this study.

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