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# Declining Student Attendance and the Quality of Learning in Community Higher Education: A Multilevel Case Study of Achham

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## ABSTRACT

Declining class attendance has become a major threat to the educational and institutional viability of community campuses in geographically remote parts of Nepal. This article reviews the situation of student attendance in the nine higher education institutions of Achham district and discusses the implications for individual, classroom and institutional levels. The study's design incorporates a qualitative multiple-case approach, with aggregate enrolment and attendance data, institutional profiles, a Quality Assurance and Accreditation report, local media interviews with campus leaders, and relevant research on attendance and student engagement. The evidence was structured in a cross-case matrix, and analyzed using descriptive comparison, thematic synthesis and multilevel pattern matching. The most comprehensive institutional evidence is for Achham Multiple Campus, which enrolls 1265 students, of which 70% are female, with reported regular attendance of around 20% overall and around 10% in the third and fourth years. Similar, though less precisely defined attendance challenges are noted at the other campuses in the district. The result indicates that absenteeism cannot be fully explained as a motivational failure of the individual. It arises from the combination of the unpredictable nature of employment returns, poverty and opportunity costs, remoteness and difficult terrain, early marriage and gendered care responsibilities, institutional politicization, poor infrastructure, and lack of academic significance. These stresses create cascading impacts: students receive disjointed learning; teachers have to slow down and repeat; peer learning and assessment continuity is undermined; and campuses are exposed to reputation, financial and sustainability issues. It recommends an integrated response, based on timely and accurate attendance information, flexible and blended approaches, gender-responsive support, work-integrated curricula, transport and financial support, academic supervision, depoliticised governance, and collaboration between campuses at the District level.

*Keywords:* student attendance, community campuses, learning quality, student engagement, gender, institutional sustainability

## INTRODUCTION

When students engage in organised learning they continue to have access to teaching, feedback, academic relationships and assessment preparation as key conditions. This recent evidence from the disruption caused by the pandemic has confirmed that the continuity and engagement of students can fall even if the technology used to access learning materials is available, provided that access to synchronous teaching, peer interaction, and timely feedback is blocked or compromised (UNESCO IESALC, 2020; Bond et al., 2021; World Bank et al., 2021). Being present is not sufficient to ensure learning, and mere presence is not a sufficient indicator of engagement. Behavioural engagement is, however, well recognised as encompassing participation, effort, persistence and attendance; and greater engagement is also emotional and cognitive investment (Fredricks et al., 2004; Kahu, 2013). In the

context of a student involvement theory, the learning value that students gain is partially connected with how much physical and psychological energy they invest in their academic experience (Astin, 1984). A student who is frequently absent thus has less opportunity to ask questions, clarify misconceptions, engage in collaborative work, get formative feedback, and feel a part of an academic community. The results from class attendance are generally consistent across meta-analytic and large-scale studies, with most indicating a positive relationship with course grades and academic attainment, with the strength of this association dependent upon the quality of teaching, assessment design, preparation, and alternative learning resources (Credé et al., 2010; Newman-Ford et al., 2008).

This connection is particularly significant with respect to the community-based higher education environment. Community campuses should provide greater access for students who are unable to move to urban campuses or cannot cover the cost of private schools. Public value is not just about the number of students enrolled but about their capacity to offer ongoing, reliable, participatory, and meaningful learning experiences that are relevant in their local context. The OECD (2022) and UNESCO (2021) also highlight the need for meaningful participation, institutional responsiveness, and support for students from low-income and marginalised groups who are unable to participate due to their economic and social situation in recent international analyses. A study of student persistence highlights that access is not enough if a student's affinity or sense of belonging towards the academic and social life of an institution is weak (Tinto, 1993). The concept of participation in contemporary engagement scholarship also includes an interdependency amongst the student, institutional practices and broader social contexts (Kahu, 2013). Having a relatively high number of children enrolled and few of them attending class is a challenging situation for the school: it looks good on the paper but the learning process on which it depends is limited. This equity, institutional sustainability, and quality gap between R and A is therefore, at the same time, a quality, an equity, and an institutional sustainability question.

Achham District in Sudurpashchim Province is an important setting to consider this problem. The district is hilly, villages are scattered, access to roads is not even and many homes are economically disadvantaged. The internal and international migration trends and significant geographic disparities in opportunities and services also reflect on the national census data, particularly in remote districts (National Statistics Office, 2023). Higher education is provided in the nine institutions, six of which are community campuses of Tribhuvan University, two of Sudurpashchim universities and one of constituent campus of Sudurpashchim university. Achham Multiple Campus in Mangalsen is the most visible institution, which was established in 2048 BS (1991/92 AD) and received Quality Assurance and Accreditation (QAA) certification from University Grants Commission Nepal in 2080 BS (2023/24 AD) (Achham Multiple Campus, 2024; University Grants Commission Nepal, 2023). It has a roll of 1265 pupils, around 70% of whom are girls. However, the source material indicates that the attendance rate is only around 20% across programmes and around 10% in year 3 and 4. District-wide, other campuses report similar to the above attendance issues, albeit less precisely identified (Khaptad News, 2025).

The problem is also highly gendered. Achham Multiple Campus has a higher proportion of female students, which is partly in line with the out-migration of young males for work or study as observed in Nepal (Nepal National Statistics Office, 2023). Local campuses thus provide an important avenue for women who might not otherwise have the opportunity to leave the district. Meanwhile, the study finds that women students are more likely to be exposed to early marriage, marriage and moving to another house, household work, care duties, limited movement and poor ability to make decisions about school spending compared with men (Achham Multiple Campus, 2024; Khaptad News, 2025). Broadly speaking, in other contexts of disruption in higher education, it is found that financial constraints, family duties, inequalities of study environments, and psychological pressures are not equally distributed among students (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Barrot et al., 2021). The pressures are important because the persistence of students will be affected by whether or not they can participate in the institution without compromising family, economic and social responsibilities (Tinto, 1993; Kahu, 2013). The demographic change that has brought community campuses to the forefront of the educational opportunity for women is the same one that has made

attendance policy an integral part of social support for women.

The issue isn't just that some students don't attend. It is when regular attendance has dropped to a point where the normal functions of the community campuses in the classroom become problematic. In Achham Multiple Campus, about 20% of the enrolled students are said to be attending regularly, and in the later years, only 10% are attending. This makes it challenging to ensure continuity of learning, progress through the course, plan group learning, ensure ongoing evaluation and establish consistent academic relationships. Recent disruptions to education suggest that being away from school for an extended period can exacerbate learning gaps and reduce students' sense of attachment to schools, particularly when they have limited access to recovery support (OECD, 2023; World Bank et al., 2021). If the issue is pervasive throughout a district's institutions, it can undermine public trust in the local higher education system and add to the stress on already fragile campuses.

The current evidence has some characteristics that leave a gap for research. In the first place, many studies of attendance consider absence as a separate predictor of grades. This is helpful when there is data on student levels and assessments, but it is not enough in a context where the most obvious impact is at the organisational level. Teachers need to tailor instruction, institutions provide facilities for small groups of active learners, and waning participation may affect future enrolment. Secondly, research and reports on access to higher education in Nepal have focused on enrolment, infrastructure, affiliation, or financing, but not always on attendance, and existing evidence on attendance suggests that socioeconomic, institutional, academic, and personal obstacles limit access to higher education in Nepal (Wagle, 2024). Third, gender is often equated with a demographic variable instead of examined as a set of social relations which influence mobility, time, marriage, care work and continuity in education. Fourth, it is believed that

Formal quality assurance indicates the improvement process, but in the case of Achham, the accreditation and attendance may run parallelly (University Grants Commission Nepal, 2023). Lastly, international discussions on technology and inclusion in education in recent years have alerted to the fact that digital provision can facilitate continuity only when institutions take into consideration the uneven distribution of connectivity, devices, skills and learning contexts (UNESCO, 2023).

The study therefore seeks to fill a gap between the research on attendance, which tends to be student-centred and quantitative, and the lived reality of the remote community campuses. Low attendance is considered a system problem caused by the interplay between personal factors, gender expectancies, economic factors, geographic factors, content factors, pedagogy and governance. This is in line with recent research indicating that remote and disadvantaged participation is driven by multiple constraints and not necessarily single motivation challenges (National Statistics Office, 2023; Wagle, 2024). Achham is not a representative example of all the campuses in Nepal, but rather a demonstration of the interplay between these factors in an isolated district where higher education plays an essential social role but is structurally weak.

The study has three objectives. One is to keep record and compare the available evidences in relation to enrolment, gender ratio and attendance in higher education institutions of Achham District. The second is to examine the impact of reductions in attendance on learning opportunities, classroom management, teacher effectiveness, peer interaction, institutional credibility and campus sustainability. The third is to create an evidence-based set of institutional and policy responses to meet the needs of remote, resource-poor community campuses.

Through three research questions, these objectives will be achieved: (1) What are the attendance patterns and documented barriers at student level in Achham's higher education institutions? (2) Through what mechanisms does low and irregular attendance affect the quality of learning and the functioning of classrooms and campuses? (3) Which institutional, pedagogical, gender-responsive, and policy interventions are most appropriate for reducing attendance-related educational harm in this context?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of attendance should be viewed as a part of student engagement. Fredricks et al. (2004) identify three aspects of engagement: behavioural, emotional, and cognitive. The importance of attendance is not

only in the behavioral aspect, but is also related to the students' feeling of interest, involvement, belonging, and effort in learning. Others, such as Kahu (2013), assert that engagement occurs at the juncture of student and institution. This view eliminates two false assumptions: all students in the present class are necessarily engaged, and all absences are due to bad motivation. It points to the institutional conditions which enable participation to be possible and worthwhile.

Overall, research on attendance and achievement shows a positive relationship between the two. A meta-analysis of college attendance conducted by Credé et al (2010) revealed that attendance was strongly correlated with grades and that the relationships between attendance and grades were better than several commonly studied student characteristics. Using electronic attendance records, Newman-Ford et al (2008) also found a strong relationship between attendance and attainment. These studies should not be interpreted as evidence that the presence of all students is sufficient to enhance student learning. Instead, more attendance results in more exposure to formal learning, feedback, examples, discussion, and guidance on assessments. It also creates an atmosphere of schedules and commitment which foster academic achievement.

This relationship becomes complicated by technology. Content can also be delivered to students without their physical presence in blended or digitally-supported courses, and the interaction with online content can buffer the relationship between attendance at the courses and performance (Lu & Cutumisu, 2022). This is important to Achham as flexible and blended provision may minimise impact of distance, monsoon disruption, employment and caring responsibilities. But technology is no substitute for institutional involvement. Students require stable devices, access to online connections, competency with digital tools, easily accessible materials, and opportunities to interact. In places of digital inequality, it may be possible to do more harm than good by attempting to replace classroom attendance with expectations for online learning.

The second lens is provided by student involvement theory. Astin (1984) conceptualises involvement as the physical and psychological energy that students devote to the academic experience. Students must have time and effort invested to get the most out of institutional resources. At Achham there is not only the question of whether there are teachers, there are also questions about whether there are libraries, and whether there is accreditation. It is whether pupils have opportunities to enter the learning process regularly. Time on travel, work, farm or care duties diminishes study energy. Low attendance is thus a readily observable manifestation of limited involvement.

Motivation is also included with a Self-Determination Theory explanation. Deci and Ryan (2000) make the case that autonomy, competence and relatedness are hallmarks of high motivation. Content that is not seen as relevant to work may diminish competence and purpose. Autonomy can be diminished by highly didactic teaching. Non-consistent attendance may diminish connections to teachers and classmates. These processes can create a vicious circle—students don't attend school when it doesn't seem relevant or when students don't feel socially connected, and less will attend school when classes are less interactive or when attendance is too unpredictable to permit class to advance.

Academic and social integration are also emphasized in the study of persistence and departure. Students are more likely to stay when they make meaningful connections with the academic and social life of the institution (Tinto 1993). Despite its context, the basic premise of Tinto's model is applicable: persistence is about the interplay between students' commitments and the institutional experiences. Integration can be challenging in commuter/community campuses where students have limited time on campus and significant work and family responsibilities. Higher education policies that have been developed for students enrolled in a campus-based or an urban university might, therefore, be poorly suited for students studying remotely in a community.

Socio-economic conditions play a particular role in low income and rural settings. The tuition is just part of the price of higher education. Often, travel, lodging, textbooks, Internet access, exam fees and missed wages are the difference. A scholarship that covers tuition may not allow the student to attend if they have to cross state lines for the education, or they must participate in household labour, or they must give

up a job. The notion of opportunity cost thus plays a key role in explaining why students might be enrolled but not attending regularly. Absence leaves the option open for immediate economic responsibilities and enrolment gives the opportunity of a degree.

The costs are further exacerbated by Geography. The scattered settlements and rugged topography of Achham contribute to longer travel times and the risk of attendance depending on weather and road conditions. Distance also plays a role when it comes to gender. There may be stricter domestic schedules, increased safety concerns and more limited travel options for women. Early marriage may include moving to the spouse's home and reallocating time to unpaid caregiving. A gender responsive analysis should thus consider not only the number of females enrolled but their ability to manage their time, mobility, money and family support to enroll.

Indirectly, the institutional governance affects attendance through credibility and learning conditions. Political pressures may affect appointments, funding, campus climate and expectations. If students don't feel that academic spaces are places for learning, they might not willingly attend. In inadequate infrastructure it has a similar effect. Poor classrooms, library, labs, sanitation, electricity and digital resources make it less desirable and less useful to participate on campus. Politicisation and infrastructure deficits are repeatedly mentioned as barriers in the source material for Achham.

The aim of quality assurance is to enhance governance, teaching, curriculum, research and support to pupils. It is, therefore, important that Achham Multiple Campus is certified by QAA. But accreditation is an institutional designation, not a set of automatic assurances. Quality assurance can enhance systems without having to ask students to leave school when they are constrained by transport, the need to work, to marry, or to lack employment opportunities. Accreditation was found to co-exist with very low attendance, indicating that engagement indicators should be considered as key quality indicators. Evaluation of a campus cannot only be done based on the existence of procedures, it should also be done based on the ability of students to participate and do the learning that procedures are expected to provide.

The literature so far indicates a multilevel model. The student level, attendance is a measure of factors of motivation, opportunity, and resources, as well as social responsibilities. Irregular attendance can impact classroom management, instructional pacing, continuity of assessments, and peer learning at the classroom level. At the institutional level, many institutions struggle with low attendance, resulting in poor resource utilization, reputation, financing, and sustainability. This model is not a causally tested model, rather it is a sensitising framework for the Achham study.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

The study is a qualitative, multiple-case study design that follows an embedded multilevel analysis approach. The district is the general case, and the nine HEIs are the subcases. A case study method is suitable because the rate of attendance is not independent of the geographic, socio-economic, cultural, and governance context (Yin, 2018). The design is descriptive/explanatory, not causal. It addresses observed trends and draws a sound explanation of how the trends impact on the quality of learning and institutional operations.

### Study Setting and Cases

The cases comprise six community campuses of Tribhuvan University, including Achham Multiple Campus, Punchadewal Campus, Kailash Multiple Campus, Tripura Sundari Campus, Janashiksha Campus, and Kamalbazar Multiple Campus; two community campuses of Sudurpashchim University, the Turmakhad Multiple Campus and the Ramaroshan Multiple Campus; and Janata Multiple Campus as a constituent campus. The district wide scope lessens the danger of considering Achham Multiple Campus an isolated situation. Meanwhile, the uneven data availability results in the analysis being most detailed at Achham Multiple Campus and more descriptive at other campuses.

### Documentary Corpus

The evidence base includes data on aggregate enrolment and attendance from institutions, campus profiles, programme descriptions, the University

Grants Commission's documentation for the QAA process for Achham Multiple Campus, local and national media coverage of the campus and interviews with campus leaders from 2024–2025 and academic literature on attendance, engagement and higher education participation. The search strategy to collect the information for the corpus was not a formal systematic-review protocol but rather purposive. The documents were included where they contained data for at least one of the following: institutional characteristics, enrolment, gender composition, attendance, barriers reported, pedagogical consequences, conditions of governance, institutional responses.

**Data extraction**

Information was presented in a matrix of cases by themes. The matrix was recorded for each campus for affiliation, establishment year (where available), reported enrolment, gender (where available), attendance description, barriers and responses. A second matrix was developed that categorized evidence according to the level of analysis, individual, classroom, institutional and policy. Only numeric statements that were explicitly mentioned in the source corpus were kept. If no figures are available, terms like 'reported low attendance' are used instead of estimates. Conserving this is significant as the source base does not provide a complete and standardised dataset of district attendance.

**Analysis**

The analysis was broken down into three phases. The proportion and extent of the problem were first determined by descriptive comparisons. Enrolment data for six campuses was combined, but no attempt was made to impute missing values. Second, the thematic synthesis process revealed factors which were reoccurring in the explanations: employment uncertainty, early marriage, family responsibilities, geographic isolation, financial pressure, political interference, pedagogy and curriculum relevance. Third, multilevel pattern matching analyzed the relationship between these elements to student learning, organisation of classroom and institutional sustainability in the documents. The “QAA-attendance paradox” was derived from negative case reasoning (NCR), by comparing evidence of formal quality recognition with evidence of ongoing attendance problems.

**Ethical Considerations**

This study does not report data that identifies students and only uses aggregate institutional and publicly available documentary data. Thus it poses little risk to people. Ethical responsibility means being accurate about institutions, avoiding alleging facts that are not substantiated, and distinguishing between the perceptions of the institution's leadership and what is substantiated. Reported and thematically supported patterns of claims about politicisation, employment value, marriage and gender are then made instead of claims that are universal across all students or campuses.

**Methodological Limitations**

Primary interviews, student surveys, direct examination and classroom observation, and linked attendance and examination records are not included in the study. Definitions for attendance may differ between institutions, and the current attendance figures might be for a different reporting period. Not all campus profiles contain up-to-date enrolment and gender-disaggregated data. The design fails to establish causality and to estimate the academic effect size of absence. The point of view of campus leaders can also be privileged over the students' point of view in documentary sources. These limitations are not minor; they define the boundaries of the conclusions. There are several aspects of the study that add to its value in systematising the available evidence, in locating potential mechanisms that are plausible and well supported, and in setting priorities for further detailed primary research.

## FINDINGS

**District-wide Institutional Pattern**

The source corpus identifies nine higher education institutions in Achham. Numerical enrolment is available for six of them: Achham Multiple Campus (1,265), Panchadewal Campus (436), Kailash Multiple Campus (300), Tripura Sundari Campus (500), Janashiksha Campus (276), and Kamalbazar Multiple Campus (274). Together, these figures document at least 3,051 enrolled students, excluding the three

institutions for which current enrolment was not provided. This minimum total confirms that local higher education remains socially significant. The challenge is not an absence of formal demand; it is the conversion of enrolment into sustained academic participation.

**Table 1**
*Profile of higher education institutions included in the Achham case*

| Institution | Status / affiliation | Reported enrolment | Attendance evidence |
|---|---|---|---|
| Achham Multiple Campus | Community; Tribhuvan University | 1,265 | About 20% overall; about 10% in years 3–4 |
| Panchadewal Campus | Community; Tribhuvan University | 436 | Reported as very low; percentage unavailable |
| Kailash Multiple Campus | Community; Tribhuvan University | 300 | Reported as poor; percentage unavailable |
| Tripura Sundari Campus | Community; Tribhuvan University | 500 | Persistent attendance difficulty; percentage unavailable |
| Janashiksha Campus | Community; Tribhuvan University | 276 | Only a minority reported to attend consistently |
| Kamalbazar Multiple Campus | Community; Tribhuvan University | 274 | Low attendance reported; percentage unavailable |
| Turmakhad Multiple Campus | Sudurpashchim University affiliated | Not reported | Attendance difficulty reported; percentage unavailable |
| Ramaroshan Multiple Campus | Sudurpashchim University affiliated | Not reported | Attendance difficulty reported; percentage unavailable |
| Janata Multiple Campus | Sudurpashchim University constituent | Not reported | Attendance difficulty reported; percentage unavailable |

*Note*. Enrolment and attendance values are reported in the documentary source base. Missing values were not estimated.

The most precise attendance evidence concerns Achham Multiple Campus. Reported regular attendance is approximately 20% overall and approximately 10% in the third and fourth years. The later-year decline suggests progressive disengagement rather than a single entry barrier. Students initially register and may participate more actively, but attendance becomes harder to maintain as programmes continue. The source material describes attendance at the other campuses as substantially or notably low. Because consistent percentages are unavailable, the article does not rank institutions or calculate a district mean. The defensible conclusion is that attendance decline is distributed across different affiliations and locations rather than confined to one campus.

**Gendered Access without Assured Participation**

The ratio of male to female students in Achham Multiple Campus is 2.0:1, meaning that there are about 70 percent female students. This is a significant access accomplishment in an environment where it is common for young men to migrate for work or studies. Women can access higher education closer to their communities through local campuses. However, enrolment does not necessarily represent gender equity. Repeated barriers that are identified in the documents are early marriage, moving away, domestic labour, caring responsibilities, family permission and mobility restrictions. Women may thus be officially in but de facto out.

What's learned here is that access is different from capability. Access is the availability of an institution that is close by along with the opportunity to enroll. Capability is the actual freedom to participate, learn and complete. A woman enrolled without full education capability has access when they cannot control the time, and are able to travel safely and manage household tasks. Because of the gender imbalance in the student body, the so-called ‘general’ policy on attendance is likely to be unsuccessful without taking account of the gender situation.

**Perceived Employment Returns and Curriculum Relevance**

Leaders at campus see a lack of confidence in the job market for four-year bachelor’s degrees as one of the main issues affecting attendance. When a local economy has little formal-sector jobs, students and families make choices about education based on uncertain future outcomes and costs. Marriage might be seen as a more immediate route for transitioning women, and foreign employment might be a more immediate route for men. This is not an abrogation of the students' right to education. Despite the ongoing existence of degrees, the continued enrollment indicates that they still have symbolic and practical significance. When students lack conviction that their

work in each class will lead to a better life, though, the motivation to come to class decreases.

The issue is thus to some extent a problem of curriculum signalling. Courses that are theory-heavy, have a long delay between course and exam, and have inadequate work placement may not convey a strong sense of regular attendance. The entrepreneurship activities planned at Achham Multiple Campus in poultry farming, beekeeping and pheasant farming are an attempt to make them more relevant by connecting learning to income generation in the local area. The power of these programmes is not in the number of individual training sessions that can be added on, but in the implementation of the practical learning, business planning, mentoring, credit access and assessment throughout the academic programme.

**Economic Pressure and Opportunity Cost**

There are other costs involved in tuition other than financial ones. Students lose time that can be used in agriculture, wage labour, household production and care, incur transport costs, learning-material costs, as well as connectivity costs. These indirect costs may not be covered by scholarships and tuition waivers. A student attending a class from a subsistence household can have a direct cost even if tuition is paid for by the subsistence household. Absenteeism may, therefore, be an adaptive reaction to economic pressure – not a sign of disinterest.

This can be interpreted as an explanation for the persistence of enrolment and absence. Attendance allows pupils to stay enrolled and maintains their social status and future options, whilst being occasionally absent allows pupils to fulfil current needs. The institutional challenge is to minimise the trade-off. The scheduling of classes in intensive periods, the coordination of timetables, the provision of regular academic calendars, travel facilitation and the availability of selected teaching materials at a later date (asynchronously) may enhance the possibility of participation without compromising the level of education.

**Geography, Transport, and Seasonal Disruption**

The topography and scattered settlements at Achham are structural attendance factors. Long distances decrease study time and fatigue. Heavy rainfall can also affect the road network and transport in the area, which can make it difficult for students to attend school regularly, especially from villages that are far from the school. However, these travel demands will be especially difficult for students who do not have much money for travel, disability, safety concerns or responsibility for household duties. So a uniform daily timetable puts different demands on children.

Geographic isolation is also found in the supply side of education. Hiring faculty, conducting visiting lectures, library privileges, Internet security, and working with employers could be more challenging. These factors can reduce the value of coming to school. The evidence thus suggests a double negative: distance diminishes students' abilities to access campus, and limited resources may also affect the resources available once they arrive at campus.

The source corpus contains concerns about leadership that political activity has taken precedence over academic concerns on some campuses. These reports should be read with caution as the study does not measure political interference itself. However, the theme reappears and has analytical significance. Politicisation may impact appointments, decision-making, campus climate, timetable stability and allocation of attention. There is a risk that students who don't feel the educational environment is stable will rationally decrease their attendance as investments in the institution.

It's not just an operational impact, but a reputational impact as well. Public trust is critical to the success of community campuses. Families are less inclined to contribute to the costs of attendance when the atmosphere at the campus seems to be dominated by political competition or when there is a high frequency of disruption of academic routines. Depoliticisation does not mean the censorship of legitimate student representation and civic discourse. It should imply that academic calendars, appointments, assessments and resource decisions shouldn't be subject to partisan capture.

**Infrastructure and the Value of Presence**

There are several reports of campuses not having sufficient classrooms, library facilities, laboratories, technology, sanitation facilities, electricity or connectivity. These deficiencies will affect attendance

as they alter the marginal benefit of attending. It may seem that the value of the students' attendance is low if they have to make long journeys to attend classes and be given lectures in poorly equipped rooms. In contrast, experiences in the laboratories, libraries, reliable internet, advising, group work and practical activities are not easily reproduced by students alone and thus enhance the added value of being present.

Infrastructure is not a strictly capital issue. Small wins, combined with pedagogy, can make a difference: functional learning spaces, pre-arranged time to use computers, hygienic toilet for women, effective notification systems, recorded mini-lectures, low bandwidth learning platforms. The fundamental approach is that the school attendance should offer an exceptional learning opportunity.

**Classroom-level Consequences**

Very low and irregular attendance disrupts cumulative teaching. Instructors cannot assume that students present in a given week have encountered previous content. They may repeat explanations, slow the pace, or teach to a small group whose composition changes from class to class. This reduces the time available for advanced material, practice, discussion, and feedback. The "reteaching burden" affects even students who attend regularly because their learning is paced around the discontinuity of others.

Peer learning also weakens. Group projects are difficult to organise when membership is unstable. Discussion becomes less diverse, peer explanation is reduced, and students have fewer opportunities to develop communication and teamwork. Small classes can support intensive learning when attendance is consistent, but extremely small and unpredictable groups can create a sense that the programme lacks momentum. Teachers may become demotivated when preparation results in very low turnout, and students may avoid classes because they expect few peers to be present. This is a coordination failure in which individual absence makes future absence more likely.
Assessment continuity is another concern. Formative assessment depends on repeated cycles of task, feedback, revision, and progression. Irregular attendance interrupts these cycles. Students may appear only near examinations, increasing pressure for compressed revision and encouraging surface learning. The available evidence does not provide linked assessment data, so the article does not claim a measured reduction in grades. It identifies a credible mechanism through which learning quality is likely to be weakened.

**Institutional Consequences**

Campuses must employ teachers, maintain facilities, administer examinations, and provide student services regardless of daily turnout. When only a small proportion of enrolled students participates, the cost per active learner rises and resources are underused. Low attendance also weakens the evidence that programmes are meeting community needs. Over time, poor classroom vitality can affect reputation, future enrolment, staff morale, and the willingness of government or donors to invest.
A self-reinforcing cycle can develop. Limited resources contribute to weak facilities and conventional pedagogy; students perceive low value and attend less; low participation reduces fee revenue and institutional credibility; and the campus has even fewer resources to improve. The threat of closure reported by community-campus representatives in Sudurpashchim Province should therefore be understood as the possible end point of cumulative decline, not as an immediate prediction for every institution.

**The QAA-attendance Paradox**

Achham Multiple Campus received QAA certification yet continues to report critically low attendance. This is not evidence that QAA is useless. Accreditation can strengthen governance, documentation, planning, curriculum processes, and student services. The paradox lies in assuming that institutional compliance automatically overcomes student-level barriers. QAA may improve the supply of quality while poverty, distance, gender norms, and weak employment prospects suppress students' ability or incentive to use it.

The finding suggests that quality assurance frameworks should include outcome-sensitive indicators such as verified attendance, engagement, retention, progression, timely completion, participation in advising, and student use of learning resources. These indicators should be interpreted contextually rather than used punitively. A remote campus serving working and married students may

require different modes of participation from an urban full-time institution. The objective should be meaningful engagement, not administrative enforcement detached from students' realities.

**Existing institutional responses**

The source corpus identifies several responses: scholarships and fee waivers, practical placements in schools, banks, financial institutions, and government offices, planned entrepreneurship training, interactive teaching, digital resources, Wi-Fi, and Education Management Information Systems. These initiatives address important dimensions of the problem. Their limitation is fragmentation. A scholarship may not solve travel or care burdens; a digital platform may not solve connectivity; entrepreneurship training may not improve attendance unless embedded in the curriculum; and attendance software may record absence without enabling an effective response.
The evidence therefore supports an integrated rather than programme-by-programme strategy. Data must identify who is absent and when; advising must determine why; support must address the barrier; pedagogy must make participation valuable; and governance must protect academic continuity. Coordination across the nine campuses could reduce duplication and enable shared services, joint training, compatible calendars, and collective advocacy.

## DISCUSSION

The results indicate that attendance is a relational and institutional phenomenon. The balance between personal responsibilities and campus educational opportunities influences students' presence. This interpretation is supported by engagement theory in which engagement is situated in the learner-institution interface (Kahu, 2013). It also provides a broader lens on attendance than has previously been available because it illustrates that the effects of missing school are not just felt by the absentee student. Absence that occurs in large numbers alters the classroom that all students experience.

The difference between individual absenteeism and organisational absenteeism is illustrated by the Achham case. There are often situations where absenteeism can be solved by advising, reminders and academic support for the individual. Organisational absenteeism refers to when participation levels are low and are acceptable as regular practice within programmes and institutions. Timetables adjust to poor attendance, as do pedagogy, assessment, finances and reputation. Administratively, the institution might go on but its academic backbone starts to be depleted. For policy this is critical; an organisational problem cannot be solved by disciplining individuals.

The steady drop in the later years is remarkably large. It indicates that there is a lack of continued integration. That's because Tinto (1993) noted the importance of academic and social integration. Students who do not form positive relationships, nor experience curricular relevance or growth may only have a nominal affiliation with the institution. There is no residential life in remote commuter campuses so integration cannot rely on residential life. It should be created via advising, cohort design, meaningful group projects, mentoring, field placements, and regular interactions with faculty. The motivation dynamics can also be explained by the self-determination theory. Students may not be allowed to be autonomous if there is little autonomy in the timing or mode of study. Competence can be undermined through non-continuous attendance and reduced feedback. When classrooms are under-attended and attendance is inconsistent, there are opportunities for relatedness to decrease. Interventions should be more than a call to presence. Autonomy can be enhanced by offering flexible modes, competence can be developed through structured tutoring and formative assessment, and relatedness can be enhanced through cohort-based activities (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Gender results are not an add-on, but central. The 70% female student population alters the role of the campus. These institutions are more than degree producers – they are significant infrastructures that create women's capacity, voice and potential economic contribution. However, any benefits will be exaggerated when attendance and completion are not looked at in the context of policy. To ensure gender-responsive higher education in Achham, there is a need for family engagement, safe travel routes, flexible schedules, support upon marriage, child sensitive arrangement and job oriented path. It also involves prevention of deficit discourses that present women as victims. The evidence reveals persistence:

there are significant barriers that many women persist through.

The paradox of the QAA attending poses a wider question about the quality policy in higher education. Quality assurance can be directed at the structure, documents, governance bodies, the curricula, the qualifications of the teachers, and the facilities. These are compulsory inputs. But, the experience of quality comes in the form of participation. A high-performing campus with a low number of students can have excellent systems in place, yet still not be able to provide learning on a large scale. Engagement, retention and progression should thus be identified as key quality criteria and should be reviewed diagnostically, not punitively.

The results also highlight the dangers of a technology solution that is too easy. If we can design blended learning to be low bandwidth and access to devices is uneven, then it is possible to significantly overcome geographic and scheduling constraints. Passive teaching can be reproduced in recorded lectures. A successful blended provision would include short downloadable components, where required, printed learning packs, regular tutorials in person, advising on the telephone and/or through messages, and the provision of clear formative tasks. The intent is not to de-emphasize attendance, but to provide a variety of pathways to meaningful participation while maintaining key in-person activities.

Another important mechanism for curriculum relevance is also considered. Planned entrepreneurship programmes directly address the issue of employment returns that students are concerned about. They will become more effective when integrated with the local economic ecosystem and degree outcomes. Training should be connected with market analysis, cooperative models, financial literacy, digital marketing, extension services, local government and credit. Similarly, practicum and internships should involve clear learning objectives, supervision, assessment, and reflection. Work-integrated learning has the potential to make attendance more meaningful to students when they can make a link between what they are learning in school and opportunities for employment.

Lastly, the district has nine campuses, providing an opportunity for collaboration. There are different administrative systems between institutions affiliated to different universities, while the geographical and socioeconomic environment of students are shared. A district attendance and student-success consortium could be formed to share definitions, to share staff development, to coordinate specialised courses, to form partnerships around transportation or around digital learning, and to advocate as a group. While collaboration would not eliminate institutional competition, it would help to lessen the inefficiency of separate responses to the same crisis.

## CONCLUSION

The problem of enrolment in the community higher education system in Achham is a multi-level issue that carries far-reaching implications. Available evidence shows that Achham Multiple Campus, with a total roll of 1265 students, about 70% of whom are girls, has a reported regular attendance of around 20% overall, and about 10% in the third and fourth years. There are similar challenges reported at other campuses throughout the district, but full standardized data are not currently available.

The analysis reveals that low attendance is a result of a combination of unclear labor return, poverty and opportunity costs, travel difficulties, early marriage and care, poor infrastructure, politicisation, and limited perceived relevance. These pressures cause students to experience disjointed learning, repetition and inconsistent engagement in classrooms, diminished student peer learning and increasing financial and reputational risk to institutions. The problem becomes self-reinforcing: lack of participation not only causes poor learning quality and institutional life, but also makes it even less appealing to attend.

The fact that the decline in the rates of attendance continued after certification by the QAA shows that the formal quality assurance approach is not enough. The practical conditions of the students' participation should be linked to institutional systems. In remote higher education, assessment of quality thus needs to include notions of meaningful engagement, progression and learning, equity, and governance and infrastructure. Coordinated action is needed for a credible response. Governance and administration need to ensure that there is no gap in academic continuity; pedagogy and curricula to ensure this is "worthwhile"; financial assistance to cover indirect

costs; measures to take into account the needs of women and girls, to ensure that their enrolment translates to sustained participation; and early advising supported by reliable data; and timetables and blended provision to reflect students' circumstances. These measures can be reinforced under a District-level collaboration in all nine institutions.

Community campuses in Achham continue to be crucial as they offer students' access to higher education who have no practical choices. Institutions cannot guarantee their sustainability based on enrolments alone. It requires enrolled students to be able to repeatedly gain access to an accessible, relevant, supportive and credible learning process. Addressing the issue of decreased attendance is not an administrative exercise confined to a single area. It plays a key role in the quality of education, gender parity, local development and the future of higher education in remote Nepal.

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