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Exploring Academic Challenges of BBS Students in Public Colleges: An Evidence from Pokhara Valley, Nepal

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Abstract

Background: BBS students enrolled in public colleges of Pokhara Valley, Nepal face persistent academic underperformance characterised by high course failure, course repetition, delayed graduation, and significant dropout. The study identifies systemic underfunding and governance failures as primary contributors to this crisis, yet students' lived experiences remain systematically underexplored.

Methods: This study adopted an interpretivism paradigm and a phenomenological research design. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 12 purposively sampled BBS students and 4 faculty key informants across three public colleges in Pokhara Valley. Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis framework.

Results: Five major themes emerged: (1) Institutional Resource Deficits: inadequate libraries, non-functional computer labs, overcrowded classrooms, and chronic examination delays linked to Tribhuvan University's centralised examination system; (2) Pedagogical and Curricular Limitations: exclusive lecture-based instruction and an outdated curriculum; (3) Socio-Economic Pressures: part-time work averaging 20 hours weekly and severe financial hardship; (4) Psychological Consequences: demotivation, anxiety, and dropout ideation; and (5) Coping Strategies: peer study groups, question bank reliance, private tutoring, and universal use of AI tools.

Conclusion: Academic challenges among BBS students in Nepal's public colleges are systemic, not individual. Meaningful improvement requires urgent institutional reform in infrastructure, pedagogy, curriculum, and student support systems.

Novelty: This study provides the first phenomenological account of BBS students' academic experiences in Pokhara Valley, Nepal, contextualised within Nepal's specific higher education governance challenges, and documents AI tool dependency as a novel coping mechanism in a resource-constrained Global South context.

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Keywords: Qualitative phenomenological, Public higher education, Student dropout, Pedagogical limitations, AI tool dependency

Introduction

Higher education in Nepal has expanded substantially since the establishment of Tribhuvan University (TU) in 1959, which today enrols over 400,000 students across its constituent and affiliated campuses, making it one of the largest universities in South Asia. Among its most widely pursued undergraduate programs is the Bachelor of Business Studies (BBS), a four-year degree designed to prepare graduates with foundational competencies in management, accounting, finance, marketing, and entrepreneurship. The BBS program is structurally positioned to bridge academic learning and the practical demands of Nepal's growing economy. Walk through the gates of a public college in Pokhara Valley and you quickly notice the divide. Private institutions, funded through tuition, offer decent equipment, manageable class sizes, and full-time staff who have time for their students. Public colleges, the community and constituent campuses that serve families who cannot afford anything else, run on something close to goodwill and chronic underfunding. Dahal and Baral (2024) found that years of inconsistent policy and absent quality oversight have effectively locked these institutions into low-quality equilibrium. For BBS students in Pokhara Valley, the result is a graduation rate that quietly tells the story: many take five or six years to finish a four-year degree, and a significant number never finish at all (Joshi & Chand, 2026).

Research on this problem in Nepal has leaned almost entirely on surveys and statistical models. Those tools are useful for spotting patterns, but they cannot answer the questions that actually matter here; what does it feel like to fail the same subject twice? What goes through a student's mind when she is deciding whether to keep trying or walk away? This study was built around those questions. It takes a qualitative, phenomenological approach precisely because the point is to understand experience, not count variables.

One thing that emerged unexpectedly during fieldwork was how central AI tools had become to students' academic survival. AI tools like ChatGPT, DeepSeek, Gemini etc. were not occasional curiosities but daily necessities for most participants. That shift has attracted some international attention (Hasanein & Sobaih, 2023; Polyportis, 2024), but in Nepal's specific higher education context it has gone essentially undocumented. This study captures this emerging phenomenon as part of a broader investigation into systemic academic challenges in Pokhara Valley's public colleges.

Research Objectives

The study was guided by the following specific objectives:

- To explore lived experiences of BBS students within their academic environment in public colleges of Pokhara Valley.
- To identify and categorise the multi-dimensional challenges impacting students' academic performance.
- To investigate coping strategies of the students to manage academic challenges.
- To explore student’s recommendations for improving academic experience.

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Literature Review

Nepal's Public Higher Education: The Structural Context

Getting to grips with what BBS students in public colleges face requires starting somewhere that academic studies rarely start: with an honest account of the system itself. Dahal and Baral (2024), writing in Nepal's Educational Journal, were direct about it; TU's academic programs have drifted badly out of alignment with what the labour market actually needs, and the reasons are not mysterious. Years of underfunding, absent quality assurance, and governance that moves slowly when it moves at all have produced institutions that are officially functioning but practically struggling. The reforms their analysis called for curriculum overhaul, genuine institutional autonomy, and digital teaching infrastructure remain largely hypothetical.

Then there is TU's examination system, which deserves a paragraph of its own. Timilsena et al. (2024) documented result publication delays running between twelve to nineteen months. Students pass or fail a year of their academic life and then wait sometimes for the better part of two years to find out the outcome. That is not a minor administrative inconvenience; it is a structural disruption that affects every decision a student makes about their academic future. It was mentioned, with varying degrees of frustration, by every participant in this study.

Teacher motivation is the third piece of the structural puzzle. Gaihre et al. (2022), through qualitative fieldwork with community college faculty across Nepal, found low pay, no professional development, and poor working conditions had produced a teaching workforce that was, understandably, not giving much more than what the job formally required. The image that emerged from interviews for this study is that a part-time teacher arriving, delivering a monologue, and leaving before students have time to raise a hand. It is not a personal failing. It is what happens when the institution provides no incentive for anything else. Shrestha et al. (2024) put it in comparative terms, contrasting Nepalese students' infrastructure and connectivity deficits against UK counterparts during the COVID-19 period — the gaps, they found, were simply in a different category. Broader South Asian comparative scholarship situates these challenges within a regional pattern: Tilak (2020) documented how higher education systems across South Asia face the tension between massification and quality maintenance, while Rahman and Hamid (2019), studying public university students in Bangladesh, found strikingly similar dynamics of time poverty, institutional under-resourcing, and surface-level academic

The dropout dimension of all this has been studied by Joshi and Chand (2026), which traced attrition patterns across TU and Far Western University and arrived at a conclusion that this study's participants would recognise immediately: students don't leave because they've given up personally. They leave because the weight of institutional failure eventually exceeds any realistic hope that things will improve. Around 30% of Nepalese university graduates end up unemployed or working outside their field (Dahal & Baral, 2024), a figure that sits at the end of a long chain of failures that begins long before graduation.

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Theoretical Frameworks

Three theoretical lenses shaped how this study was designed and how its findings were later made sense of. The first, Tinto's Student Integration Model starts from a deceptively simple premise: students stay when they feel academically and socially woven into their institution, and leave when they don't. Academic integration is about intellectual engagement, feedback, and the kind of relationship with faculty where a student feels seen. Social integration is about belonging clubs, friendships, the small daily rituals that make a campus feel like somewhere you actually want to be. Lose either thread, or the risk of departure climbs sharply (Nistor & Neubauer, 2023). Piepenburg and Beckmann (2022) tested this empirically and found that both dimensions independently push dropout intention up or down. In Nepal's public colleges, the structural conditions-- seventy, eighty students in a room, no mentoring, nothing resembling campus life make genuine integration not just difficult but structurally improbable.

The second lens is Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. Its essential insight is that: you cannot understand what is happening to a person without looking at the layers of context surrounding them. The microsystem is where daily life happens; the overcrowded classroom, the cramped family home with no quiet corner for studying. Beyond that sits the exosystem, where institutional forces operate without the student's direct involvement: TU's examination scheduling decisions, budget allocations, staffing policies. And further out still is the macrosystem — the national economic and political conditions that determine how much public money flows into community colleges, and how much doesn't. A student struggling to pass their second-year accounting paper is not failing in isolation. They are the point where all these layers converge.

The third framework is Self-Determination Theory. At its core, SDT makes a claim that is both obvious and frequently ignored by institutions: people learn better when they feel some choice in how they learn, when they experience themselves as genuinely improving, and when they feel a human connection to the people teaching them. Bureau et al. (2021) assembled a large body of evidence confirming that these three needs autonomy, competence, and relatedness — predict sustained academic motivation more reliably than most other factors. González-Arias et al. (2025) showed more recently that need satisfaction translates directly into performance

Institutional Barriers and the Teaching-Learning Environment

Walk into a poorly resourced university classroom and what you find, typically, is a teacher talking and students copying. Not because either party prefers it that way, but because there is nothing else available; no projector, no case materials, no internet, no space for a smaller group to work in. Infrastructure shapes pedagogy, and absent infrastructure tends to produce passive pedagogy. Johansen et al. (2023) ran an experiment on content relevance: when students could see how what they were learning connected to their lives and career goals, their motivation and vitality went up measurably. The reverse also holds. Students in this study were sitting through manual bookkeeping lessons in the morning and then going to jobs where accounting software handled everything that afternoon. That gap communicates, lesson after lesson that what happens in college doesn't quite connect to anything real. Frontiers in Education (2024) found that when students hit their lowest points academically and go looking for help, what they

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encounter in Global South institutions is usually nothing. No advisor, no counsellor, no one whose job it is to notice they're in difficulty.

Financial Hardship, Work, and Inequality

Studying with part time job is not in itself, an unusual. Many students manage both. The problem is what happens at the margins; when the hours are long, the income is uncertain, and study time gets steadily crowded out. Dungon et al. (2025) found that students in paid employment lose significant ground in the kinds of academic engagement that most matter for real learning: extended reading, careful revision, sitting with a difficult idea until it clicks. Kim (2024) traced the problem one step further: financial worry is not just a time constraint. It occupies the mind in ways that crowd out concentration. Students who are anxious about next month's rent are not fully available, cognitively, for the kind of focused engagement that academic progress requires. For students studying public colleges in Nepal, having monthly family incomes below NPR 25,000 is the norm rather than the exception among participants in this study. These are not occasional inconveniences. They are structural features of daily life. And when private tutoring is the only reliable route to actually understanding course content, but only those who can pay NPR 3,000 per subject can access it, the same institution delivers very different educational experiences to students sitting in the same examination hall.

Psychological Toll and the Risk of Dropout

There's a point in any sustained difficult experience where the stress stops being situational and starts being who you are. Several participants in this study had passed that point. Wang et al. (2026) tracked how academic pressure in under-resourced settings produces a recognisable sequence: anxiety first, then withdrawal, then avoidance, including avoidance of whatever support services exist, however limited. Pusztai et al. (2022) mapped the predictors of dropout

AI Tools: A New Coping strategy

It’s easy to talk about AI in education as a high-tech revolution, but for students in under-resourced institutions, it’s something much more personal: a quiet, urgent workaround. In places like Nepal, where libraries are under-stocked, instructors are overstretched and often unavailable, and a simple clarification can take days to get, tools like ChatGPT, DeepSeek etc. have become a lifeline, not a luxury. Hasanein and Sobaih (2023) captured this reality well, showing that students turn to AI not because they’re lazy, but because they need help now, in a way no one around them has the time or resources to offer. However, as Polyportis (2024) observed over time, this same lifeline can slowly turn into a crutch. The more students lean on AI to fill the gaps left by their institutions, the harder it becomes to trust their own thinking, to struggle productively with a problem, or to develop the quiet confidence that comes from figuring things out alone. This study listens closely to those students in Nepal, trying to understand their daily choices, frustrations, and fears because, until now, their voices have been almost entirely absent from the conversation.

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Methods

This study adopted an interpretivism paradigm, which prioritises understanding how individuals make meaning of their experiences, and employed a qualitative, phenomenological research design. The design was cross-sectional, with data collected at a single point in time across three public colleges in Pokhara Valley, Kaski District, Gandaki Province, Nepal, the second-largest educational hub in the country. The three theoretical frameworks guiding the study (Tinto's Student Integration Model, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, and Self-Determination Theory) informed the design of the semi-structured interview guide. Specifically, questions probing academic and social integration (e.g., "Do you feel your teachers know you as an individual?"; "Are there college-based activities or groups you participate in?") drew on Tinto's framework; questions about institutional resources and external pressures (e.g., "How do TU examination schedules affect your academic planning?"; "What role does your family's financial situation play in your studies?") drew on Bronfenbrenner's ecological levels; and questions about motivation, autonomy, and perceived competence (e.g., "Do you feel you have any choice in how you learn?"; "When did you last feel genuinely confident in your academic ability?") drew on SDT constructs.

Purposive sampling was applied with the following inclusion criteria: currently enrolled in BBS at a public college in Pokhara Valley; experienced at least one academic challenge (score below 40% in two or more courses (TU's passing threshold is 40% in most BBS courses), repeated at least one course, irregular attendance exceeding 30%, or self-reported struggle); willing to participate voluntarily; and able to communicate in Nepali or English. First-year students with fewer than six months of enrolment were excluded. Data saturation was determined following Guest et al. (2020) and was achieved at 12 student participants (second to fourth year). For faculty key informants, a purposive sample of 4 was selected to serve a triangulation function rather than to achieve independent saturation; informational redundancy across faculty accounts was reached by the fourth interview, with no substantively new institutional perspectives emerging. This limitation is acknowledged: faculty saturation was not formally pursued using the Guest et al. (2020) protocol.

Primary data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews lasting 40–50 minutes with students and 20–30 minutes with faculty, conducted in private locations of participants' choosing. All interviews were conducted in Nepali, audio-recorded with informed consent, and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were immediately anonymised (codes S01–S12 for students; T01–T04 for faculty) and translated into English by the author, a bilingual researcher fluent in both Nepali and English. Translation prioritised cultural and emotional nuance; culturally specific idioms and expressions were rendered by seeking the closest functional equivalent in English rather than literal word-for-word translation. A back-translation verification procedure was applied to a 20% random sample of transcripts: a Nepali-English bilingual colleague independently re-translated the English versions back into Nepali, and any semantic discrepancies were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached. Supplementary document analysis of institutional records provided contextualisation.

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Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) six-phase framework: (1) familiarisation through repeated reading of all transcripts; (2) systematic initial coding using Microsoft Excel, where line-by-line inductive coding was applied to each transcript, with the paragraph as the primary unit of analysis; (3) searching for candidate themes by clustering related codes; (4) reviewing and refining themes against the full dataset; (5) defining and naming final themes; and (6) producing the report supported by participant quotations. The coding process was data-driven (inductive): initial open codes were generated without reference to the a priori theoretical frameworks, which were applied interpretively during the Discussion phase. An initial codebook of 43 discrete codes was generated from a 25% sample of transcripts. These codes were clustered into 14 candidate sub-themes, then reviewed against the full dataset to produce the final 5 themes and 16 sub-themes presented in Table 2. Coding validation was conducted through peer-debriefing: a colleague with qualitative research experience reviewed a 30% sample of coded transcripts and confirmed alignment between coded excerpts and their assigned categories; any discrepancies were resolved by discussion. Trustworthiness was further established through triangulation of student and faculty accounts, member-checking of emerging themes with three student participants who confirmed the themes as representative of their experiences, and thick contextual description. Ethical approval was granted by the Research Management Cell (RMC), Janapriya Multiple Campus, Pokhara (JMC, Ref. No.-2082/083, Dispatch No.-1103) on 23 Dec. 2025. The study adhered to Tribhuvan University's research ethics guidelines. All interview audio files and transcripts were stored in password-protected folders accessible only to the researcher, and all data will be securely deleted three years after publication in accordance with institutional data retention policy. Participants were not financially compensated; all participated voluntarily, and transportation costs were not reimbursed as interviews were conducted at college premises or locations of participants' choosing within the campus vicinity. All participants provided written informed consent and were assured of anonymity and the unconditional right to withdraw.

Results

Five major themes emerged from thematic analysis of 12 student and 4 faculty interviews. Participant demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1 and the full thematic structure is summarised in Table 2.

Table 1: *Demographic Characteristics of Student Participants (n=12)*

Characteristic	Category	n	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	4	33.33
	Female	8	66.67
Year of Study	Second Year	3	25.00
	Third Year	7	58.33

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	Fourth Year	2	16.67
	Yes (working)	6	50.00
Part-Time Work	No (family-supported)	2	16.67
	Not working (family-supported, no income)	4	33.33
Monthly Family Income	Below NPR 15,000	2	16.67
	NPR 15,000–25,000	5	41.67
	Above NPR 25,000	3	25.00
Academic Difficulty Indicators	Failed ≥2 courses	10	83.33
	Repeated ≥1 course	8	66.67
	Irregular attendance >30%	9	75.00

Source: Field data (2026)

Among the 12 student participants, 4 were male and 8 were female, aged 20 to 24 years. Three were in their second year, seven in their third year, and two in their fourth year. Six (50%) were engaged in part-time employment, primarily in hospitality, retail, and private tutoring. Ten had monthly family incomes below NPR 25,000. All had experienced at least one academic difficulty indicator: 10 had failed two or more courses, 8 had repeated at least one course, and 9 reported irregular attendance exceeding 30% in at least one academic year. The four faculty key informants had 5 to 18 years of teaching experience; two were full-time lecturers and two were part-time faculty at their respective institutions.

Theme 1: Institutional Resource Deficits

Severe inadequacies in physical and academic infrastructure were the most universally and intensely reported challenges across all 12 student interviews. Every participant spoke about the library in terms that ranged from disappointment to outright frustration. Textbooks were out of date and there were far too few copies for cohorts of eighty or more students. Online journals, business periodicals, and academic databases were simply absent. This is consistent with what Dahal and Baral (2024) reported at the national level about infrastructure gaps in Nepal's public college sector.

> ***S03 (third-year student):*** *"Our library has few copies of taxation and auditing textbooks, but our class has 83 students. We cannot borrow because the books are for reference only. Most of us have no personal books."*
>
> ***S12 (fourth-year student):*** *"There are no journals, no business magazines, and no access to online databases. How can we learn modern business practices?"*

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Eight participants reported non-functional or severely under-equipped computer labs. All 12 described classrooms built for 50 students accommodating 80–85 enrolled students with non-functional fans and shared benches. All participants had experienced significant examination and result publication delays, with some waiting five to seven months for results, a systemic failure Timilsena et al. (2024) documented as endemic to TU's centralised examination system.

> ***S10 (fourth-year student):*** *"Our first-year exam was delayed by two months. Then results took another five months. Some students who failed did not know until halfway through the next year. This destroys academic planning."*
>
> ***T04 (faculty):*** *"Delays are systemic. TU takes months to publish results. Examinations are not held on time. Students lose momentum. Some simply give up."*

Theme 2: Pedagogical and Curricular Limitations

All 12 participants characterised teaching as exclusively lecture-based across all courses and all years of their studies. No participant had delivered a class presentation, engaged in case study analysis, or participated in problem-based learning within formal instruction, a finding consistent with Gaihre et al.'s (2022) account of pedagogical stagnation in Nepal's community colleges, where teacher demotivation and the absence of training lock instruction into a passive, transmissive mode.

> ***S08 (second-year student):*** *"Teachers come to the class, write points on the board from their notes or the textbook, just describe orally and leave class. They never give us problems to solve. We just listen and copy. It is very passive. After two periods, I feel my mind shutting down."*
>
> ***T03 (faculty):*** *"I know the lecture method is not effective. But there is no option with 80 students in a cramped room, no projector, and no materials. I have not been trained in other methods yet."*

Curriculum content was unanimously described as out-dated and disconnected from current business practice, particularly in digital marketing, accounting software, and data analytics. Seven participants found their teachers inaccessible outside class, part-time faculty departed immediately after lectures. All 12 reported receiving no formal academic counselling throughout their studies.

> ***S11 (third-year student):*** *"I learn marketing theories about the 4Ps, segmentation, and so on. But at my job, I see digital marketing, social media ads, and customer relationship management software. None of these are in our syllabus. What I am learning has no connection to the real business world."*

Theme 3: Socio-Economic Pressures

Six participants were working part-time to support themselves or their families, putting in roughly twenty hours a week on top of their studies. Their average study time outside class dropped to five to eight hours per week as compared to fifteen to twenty hours among those who were not working. The arithmetic of that gap has obvious consequences.

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> ***S04 (third-year student):*** *"I'm working at a hotel from 9 AM to 5 PM from Sunday to Friday. In the evening, I get already exhausted to study. I only get time to study only on Saturday."*
>
> ***S12 (fourth-year student):*** *"I want to study more. But I cannot reduce my work hours because my family depends on my income. Every hour I spend studying is an hour I am not earning."*

Even non-working participants faced severe financial constraints preventing purchase of textbooks, printed notes, and in some cases transportation to college. Nine participants came from families with limited understanding of academic demands, a dynamic especially prevalent among first-generation learners creating additional pressure through misaligned expectations about time use and study requirements. This experience aligns with the substantial international literature on first-generation college students, who characteristically navigate academic environments without family members who can model or normalise academic practice (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2023).

Theme 4: Psychological and Motivational Consequences

Ten participants reported declines in academic motivation since enrolling, with most describing the decline as beginning in the second semester and worsening by the third year of study. Eleven reported academic anxiety centred on examinations, including insomnia, palpitations, headaches, and dizziness. Seven had seriously considered leaving the BBS program entirely.

> ***S02 (third-year student):*** *"When I first joined BBS, I was excited. I wanted to be a businesswoman. But now, after two years of constant struggle, I just want to pass somehow. My dream feels dead."*
>
> ***S07 (second-year student):*** *"I'm frustrated with the college system. I attend class because I have to, not because I want to learn. I have become like a robot come, sit, listen, leave, repeat."*

Faculty confirmed these observations: T02 noted students who appeared clearly stressed, withdrawn, and exhausted but could not access psychological support because no counsellor or psychologist was available at any of the three colleges. T04 estimated dropout rates at his college above 60% from first year to fourth year, consistent with Joshi and Chand's (2026) national-level dropout findings.

Theme 5: Coping Strategies

Students developed five main coping strategies of varying effectiveness and equity implications. Ten formed informal peer study groups meeting two to three times weekly. All 12 relied heavily on collections of past examination papers (old question banks), strategically memorising answers to recurring questions as an exam survival strategy rather than for genuine conceptual understanding.

> ***S10 (fourth-year student):*** *"I do not study the whole textbook anymore. I just collect old questions from the last 10 years. If I memorise answers to 50-60 common questions, I can pass. This is not real learning, but it works."*

Those with somewhat more financial room were paying private tutors around NPR 3,000 per subject because, the tutor actually explained things properly. The college did not. This

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arrangement, while effective for those who could afford it, sharpens the inequality between students at the same institution.

The most striking finding was that, all twelve participants were using AI tools as a central part of their academic life. ChatGPT, DeepSeek, and Gemini were not occasional experiments but daily resources. None of this has been documented before in Nepal's higher education literature.

> ***S05 (third-year student):*** *"I turn to ChatGPT whenever I cannot understand the topic from the lecture. The teacher spends two hours on a topic, but ChatGPT can explain the same material in 15 minutes with clear examples. Without AI, I would have failed many subjects."*
>
> ***S01 (fourth-year student):*** *"I use ChatGPT for almost every assignment. AI is like a free tutor all-round the day. Honestly speaking, I have become dependent on it. When I try to solve problems without AI, my mind becomes blank."*

A faculty member TO3 confirmed that AI use is widespread and warned that students often can't verbally explain work they completed with AI help. At the same time, T03 acknowledged that limited institutional resources have made students' reliance on AI almost unavoidable.

Table 2: Summary of Major Themes and Sub-Themes

Major Theme	Sub-Themes
1. Institutional Resource Deficits	Library inadequacy, non-functional computer labs, overcrowded classrooms, examination and result delays
2. Pedagogical and Curricular Limitations	Lecture-only teaching, outdated curriculum, inaccessible teachers, absence of academic counselling
3. Socio-Economic Pressures	Part-time work interference, financial stress, family expectation gaps
4. Psychological and Motivational Consequences	Demotivation and hopelessness, academic anxiety and stress, dropout ideation
5. Coping Strategies	Peer study groups, old question bank reliance, private tutoring, AI tool use (ChatGPT, DeepSeek, Gemini)

Source: Field data (2026)

Discussion

A System That Produces Failure

If there is one argument worth putting clearly at the start of this discussion, it is this: the students in this study are not failing. The system is failing them. That distinction matters because

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institutional narratives in Nepal and elsewhere, tend to default to the student as the site of the problem. What the data here show is something quite different. Bronfenbrenner's framework helps name it: in the microsystem, classrooms are so packed that teaching degenerates into crowd management; in the exosystem, TU's examination machinery runs so slowly that students sometimes wait the better part of a year for results; at the macrosystem level, public colleges are chronically underfunded, delivering higher education on equipment that doesn't work and relying on staff who have no structural incentive to invest more than the minimum. Dahal and Baral (2024), reviewing Nepal's system from a national policy vantage point, arrived at exactly the same conclusion: systemic inertia, not student deficiency, produces the outcomes we observe.

Integration and the Risk of Departure

Seven of the twelve students had seriously thought about walking away. When you look at that through Tinto's framework, what is striking is how hard it is to find what should have kept them. Academic integration requires the experience of actually learning something, feedback, individual acknowledgment, a teacher who occasionally responds to a student as a person rather than broadcasting at a room of eighty. That experience was, by all accounts, rare. Social integration, the campus belonging that makes an institution feel worth staying in, was essentially absent: no clubs, no mentoring, no advising, nowhere for students to gather around a shared purpose. The peer study groups that formed were impressive efforts, but they were filling gaps the institution had created rather than building the kind of sustained connection Tinto describes as protective against leaving. Joshi and Chand (2026), tracing attrition at TU-affiliated campuses, put the mechanism clearly: students don't quit on impulse. They leave after a slow accumulation of institutional signals unanswered questions, absent results, empty offices which collectively communicate that nobody is particularly invested in their progress.

Passive Teaching and Motivational Collapse

SDT offers a useful language for naming what students lose, gradually, across their years in these colleges. Autonomy first: when the syllabus is fixed, the teaching method is fixed, and student input is not solicited, any sense of ownership over one's own learning evaporates. Competence next: failure after failure, without feedback that helps a student understand what went wrong, erodes self-belief in ways that are genuinely difficult to reverse. Relatedness last: teachers who are in and out in ninety minutes, paid per period, with no office and no reason to linger, are structurally prevented from forming the kind of relationship that makes a student feel recognised. Gaihre et al. (2022) traced the teacher's side of this carefully — demotivation among community college faculty in Nepal is not personal failure but a rational response to low pay, absent professional development, and institutional cultures that reward nothing beyond showing up. Bureau et al. (2021) and González-Arias et al. (2025) both confirm that when all three psychological needs go unmet, motivation collapses. The question-bank-dependent, exam-survival-focused studying that all twelve participants described is what fills the space where genuine learning used to be.

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Curriculum-Practice Disconnect and Structural Inequality

The gap between what students are taught and what the workplace expects is not a minor curriculum design problem. It is a structural failure with real consequences — for graduate employability, and for whether students can find any reason to engage seriously with their studies while they are still enrolled. Johansen et al. (2023) showed that when students perceive course content as relevant, their motivation and vitality go up; when they don't, the reverse. Students learning manual bookkeeping while operating accounting software at their part-time jobs is not an edge case, it was a common experience among participants. Dahal and Baral (2024) identified competency-based curriculum reform as a national priority; the students in this

AI as a Double-Edged Coping Mechanism: A Novel Nepalese Finding

The most significant and novel contribution of this study is the documentation of universal AI tool use among all participant students as a primary academic coping mechanism. All 12 participants reported using AI tools like ChatGPT, DeepSeek, Gemini etc. as their main way to cope with academic work. This is an important and new finding for studies of higher education in Nepal. It builds on Hasanein and Sobaih's (2023) work about why under-resourced institutions adopt AI, and on Polyportis's (2024) study that tracked risks of becoming dependent on AI over time. In Nepal, many public campuses lack libraries, teachers are hard to reach, and counselling services are not available. In that gap, AI tools are assuming functions traditionally performed by institutional support systems. Participant accounts suggest three modes of AI use that carry distinct pedagogical implications: instrumental use, in which AI serves as an explanation or search tool for known knowledge gaps; substitutive use, in which AI completes work a student could perform independently but chooses not to; and atrophying use, in which AI replaces cognitive effort to the extent that independent analytical capacity degrades over time — exemplified by S01's statement that "when I try to solve problems without AI, my mind becomes blank." Both teachers' observations and students' own reports confirm that the third mode is present in this sample. Nepal's universities urgently need institutional AI literacy policies that promote responsible, critical use rather than blanket prohibition or uncritical acceptance.

Conclusion

This study set out to understand, from the inside, what studying BBS in one of Pokhara Valley's public colleges is actually like. Twelve students and four faculty members were generous enough to describe it honestly and what they described was a picture of institutional failure that is persistent, interconnected, and largely invisible in the existing literature. These are not new problems; Dahal and Baral (2024) and Timilsena et al. (2024) have documented them at the national level. What this study adds is the first phenomenological account of how those failures land on individual students, day after day, across years of academic life. It also documents, for the first time in Nepal, the emergence of AI tool reliance not as a choice but as a structural response to institutional absence. Students in this study were resilient and resourceful but

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individual resourcefulness, however impressive, cannot do the work that institutions are supposed to do. Real improvement requires structural action, not exhortation.

Recommendations

- **For college administrations:**
- ✓ Should upgrade library collections with current textbooks and provide access to online academic databases and journals as a minimum institutional standard.
- ✓ •Should restore and expand functional computer labs with reliable internet connectivity to enable digital literacy development.
- ✓ Should implement section-wise teaching to reduce classroom occupancy below 50 students per section.
- ✓ Should establish dedicated academic counselling units with trained advisors available to all students.
- ✓ Should introduce faculty monitoring systems to ensure minimum consultation availability for struggling students.
- **For faculty:**
- ✓ Should adopt student-centred pedagogical approaches including case studies, group discussions, presentations, and problem-based learning.
- ✓ Should establish designated office hours or consultation times accessible to all students.
- ✓ Should provide regular formative feedback to rebuild student competence and confidence.
- ✓ Should engage in professional development in modern teaching methodologies and responsible AI integration in learning.
- **For policymakers and Tribhuvan University authorities:**
- ✓ Should revise the BBS curriculum to incorporate contemporary business competencies, digital tools, and practical applications by addressing the decade-long lag documented in this and related studies.
- ✓ Should schedule exam and publish result timely to eliminate chronic delays.
- ✓ Should substantially increase funding allocations for public college infrastructure and faculty capacity building.
- ✓ Should mandate institution-wide counselling and mentoring services as a minimum accreditation standard.
- ✓ Should develop national AI literacy policies for higher education institutions that promote critical, responsible use.

Future research would gain considerably from following BBS students across all four years rather than capturing a single moment; from comparing public and private college experiences systematically; from extending the geographic scope to compare Pokhara Valley, which is among Nepal's more resourced regions, against institutions in Karnali or Sudurpashchim Provinces, where structural deficits are considerably more acute; and from listening to the students who have already left, whose perspectives are, at present, entirely absent from the literature on attrition in Nepal's public higher education context. The relationships identified qualitatively here warrant quantitative testing: future survey-based studies could examine, for

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example, whether AI tool dependence mediates the relationship between institutional resource deficits and academic performance outcomes. Intervention studies would further strengthen the evidence base: evaluating whether dedicated academic counselling services reduce dropout ideation, or whether curriculum reform in digital business competencies improves student engagement and graduate employability, would provide the actionable evidence that policymakers currently lack. Comparative studies with South Asian peer systems, particularly India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, where similar structural tensions between massification and quality have been documented, would also situate Nepal's public higher education challenges within a regional frame and potentially identify transferable solutions.

Author Contribution

The sole author conceived and designed the study, developed all research instruments, conducted all participant recruitment, fieldwork, and interviews, performed the full thematic analysis, reviewed relevant Nepalese and international literature, and drafted and revised the manuscript in its entirety.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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