

**Causes of the Decreasing Trend in Student Numbers
in Community Colleges: A Case Study across the Hilly
Region of Nepal**

Submitted To:

Research Management Committee/IQAC

Diktel Multiple Campus

Khotang

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Introduction

1. General Background

Education is essential to Nepal's socioeconomic development, especially in the country's hilly and rural areas where access to advanced education is scarce. There has been a noticeable decrease in the number of students enrolling in Nepal's colleges, although comprehensive data for recent years might not be available. This trend has been a cause for concern among college principals and education experts (Lokantar media 2026). In Nepal, community colleges were founded to increase educational possibilities for underserved populations, guarantee fair access, and foster local human capital development. Professor Pradip Paudyal is directly feeling the burnt. 'Since last few years, we are experiencing constant decline in students' enrollment, in almost all the engineering colleges,' Principal of Acme Engineering College, Kathmandu, engineer Paudyal says (Lokantar media 2026). These colleges offer higher education at cheap prices in places where most households cannot afford private or central universities (Adhikari, 2025). Nepal's higher education sector especially within community colleges has faced growing challenges in recent years. After a steady rise, total tertiary education enrollment began to decline notably during the COVID-19 pandemic period. The universities in the country are witnessing a decline in student enrollments to the extent that they are either mulling over shutting down their different programs or college mergers (The Kathmandu Post, 2025).

Data from the University Grants Commission (UGC) show that student numbers dropped from approximately 471,000 in FY 2019–2020 to 466,000 in FY 2020–2021, and further to 460,000 in FY 2021–2022. Concurrently, community colleges are experiencing more acute enrollment declines relative to constituent or private institutions, exacerbating concerns around institutional viability and quality. Key contributing factors include the COVID-19 pandemic's disruption of normal academic delivery and students' growing inclination to study abroad, both of which disproportionately affect local community campuses. In addition, deficiencies in funding mechanisms, outdated curricula, and limited integration with labor market needs have hampered community colleges' appeal and competitiveness (Ghimire, 2024). These trends may be especially pronounced in the hilly regions of Nepal, where geographic, infrastructural, and socio-economic constraints further limit student access and retention.

However, there has been a noticeable decline in community college student enrollment in recent years, particularly in Nepal's hilly areas. The emergence of private and institutional colleges that provide contemporary facilities and courses focused on employment, labor migration abroad, the slowing of rural population growth as a result of urban migration, issues with teaching and learning quality, and the socioeconomic challenges faced by rural households are some of the factors that could account for this decline (Edusanjal).

In addition to endangering community colleges' viability, this downward tendency has an impact on educational equity and the socioeconomic prospects of mountainous areas. Community colleges may encounter significant difficulties in maintaining their quality, mobilizing resources, and serving as a social mobility ladder for disadvantaged students if the problem is not resolved. Thus, it is essential to conduct a thorough inquiry into the reasons and effects of this drop.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The goal of community colleges was to democratize higher education in Nepal, with a focus on underprivileged areas. However, there are significant worries about the diminishing student population in the steep areas (Gupta et al 2024). Numerous problems result from this tendency, including diminished academic achievement because of a lack of competition, diminished community trust, limited employment options for local students, and financial issues for universities.

Notwithstanding the importance of this problem, not much systematic study has been done to pinpoint the precise causes of the drop in enrollment at hilly community colleges and to investigate the socioeconomic and educational ramifications of this pattern (Ghimire, 2025). Policymakers, educators, and community leaders find it difficult to create effective initiatives in the absence of empirical data. Despite the significance of community colleges in expanding higher education access across Nepal's hilly regions, these institutions now face declining enrollments, raising concerns about their sustainability and effectiveness. This trend erodes educational equity, drains financial resources, and limits socio-economic development opportunities for underserved communities. The problem can be articulated as follows:

The central problem, therefore, is: Why are student enrollments in community colleges across Nepal's hilly region declining, and what are the consequences for educational access, institutional viability, and regional development?

1.3. Research Objectives

General Objective

To analyze the causes and effects of the decreasing trend in student numbers in community colleges across the hilly regions of Nepal.

Specific Objectives

- i. To identify the main root causes of reducing trend of students enrollment numbers in community colleges of hilly regions.
- ii. To suggest the institutions and policymakers for increasing enrollment in the future years.

1.4 Limitations of the Study

The present research focuses in hilly regions community colleges of Nepal and the other geographical area will be avoided that lacks the incomplete analysis. Data Availability as College-specific enrollment data may be patchy or inconsistently maintained, particularly for rural institutions. External Variables such as broader factors such as national economic shifts, political instability, or demographic changes may influence outcomes beyond the research's immediate scope. Interviews or surveys may reflect institutional viewpoints more than student experiences, skewing interpretation.

1.5 Significance of the Study

By identifying localized drivers of declining enrollments, the study informs targeted policy responses at the UGC, provincial, and local government levels. Community colleges can leverage findings to revise curricular offerings, funding strategies, and marketing to attract and retain student (Gimire 2021). The research fills a gap in the literature by focusing specifically on hilly regional dynamics within Nepal's tertiary education system. Future Planning: Offers empirical basis for designing post-pandemic recovery strategies, resilience measures, and long-term sustainability plans.

Literature Review

Empirical Study Review

Several studies have examined the reasons behind the declining number of students in higher education in Nepal. Ghimire (2025) reported that the lack of quality education, market-oriented courses, opportunities to combine education with part-time employment, and practical-based learning are important factors contributing to the decreasing number of university students. Similarly, Lokantar Media (2026) identified several major causes of declining enrollment in higher education, including demographic changes, perceptions regarding educational quality and employability, economic difficulties, limited relevance of courses, political instability, poor quality of education, limited course choices, weak employment and career prospects, and inadequate opportunities for research and innovation. These factors indicate that students are increasingly concerned about the practical value and future benefits of higher education. Student dropout and non-attendance are also influenced by social and economic conditions. In Nepal, poverty, illiteracy, early marriage, traditional social practices, inadequate transportation, lack of educational materials, and environmental and climatic difficulties have been reported as important factors affecting students' continuation of education. Such challenges may be more serious in rural and hilly areas where access to educational institutions and other facilities is comparatively limited. Recent empirical studies further support these observations. Chand and Joshi (2026) found that attraction toward foreign education, limited employment opportunities, financial difficulties, weak academic motivation, outdated curricula, and institutional weaknesses contribute to declining enrollment. Kafle and Sigdel (2025) similarly reported that financial problems, low perceived value of higher education, and foreign employment influence students' decisions to leave college. Tiwari and Dhungana (2026) also found that migration aspirations are associated with students' family migration experiences, satisfaction with education, place of residence, and institutional characteristics. These findings are particularly relevant to community colleges in Nepal's hilly regions, where students may increasingly move to urban areas or abroad for better educational and career opportunities.

Theoretical Study Review

The declining trend in student numbers can be understood through Human Capital Theory, Push–Pull Theory of Migration, and Institutional Choice Theory. Human Capital Theory assumes that students consider the future benefits of education when selecting an institution. If local colleges do not provide relevant courses, practical skills, or good employment opportunities, students may prefer institutions that offer better career prospects. Push Pull Theory of Migration also provides an important explanation. Limited educational facilities, fewer employment opportunities, poor infrastructure, and concerns about educational quality may push students away from their local communities, while better education, employment, and living opportunities in cities and foreign countries may attract them. Williams (2009) found a relationship between education and migration in Nepal, suggesting that educational experiences and aspirations can influence migration decisions.

Institutional Choice Theory further explains that students' decisions are influenced by the perceived quality and reputation of institutions, availability of relevant courses, teaching quality, facilities, student support, and future career opportunities. Therefore, the declining enrollment in community colleges, particularly in the hilly region of Nepal, may be the result of a combination of institutional limitations, economic pressures, changing student expectations, and increasing opportunities outside the local area. The declining number of students in community colleges can be understood from different theoretical perspectives, particularly Human Capital Theory, Push–Pull Theory of Migration, and Institutional Choice Theory. Human Capital Theory explains that students generally select educational institutions based on the benefits they expect to receive from their education in the future. Therefore, colleges that provide limited employment opportunities, less market-oriented programs, or fewer opportunities for career development may gradually become less attractive to students. Similarly, Push–Pull Theory explains that students may leave their local communities because of factors such as limited educational facilities, fewer employment opportunities, and concerns about the quality of education, while better educational institutions, employment opportunities, and living conditions elsewhere attract them. Williams (2009) also found a relationship between education and migration in Nepal, suggesting that education can influence students' decisions to migrate. From the institutional perspective, students' choices are also affected by the quality of teaching, curriculum relevance, institutional facilities, student satisfaction, and overall academic environment. In the Nepalese context,

Subedi (2025) identified small campus size, increasing youth labour migration, the movement of +2 graduates to other places, and weaknesses in the quality of higher education as important challenges facing local campuses. These theoretical perspectives help explain why community colleges, particularly those in hilly areas, may experience a continuous decline in student enrollment.

2.1 Research Methods

2.2 Population

The population of the research will be the 12th class passed students from the schools of Khotang district.

2.3 Sampling

The sample will be taken 4 community and 2 private schools. The schools will be chosen randomly a municipality.

2.4 Sample Size

The all students passed 12th class in 2078/079, 2079/080, 2080/081 and 2081/082 fiscal year from six schools.

2.5 Data collection Method

The data will be collected by distributing semi structured questionnaire. The questionnaires will be distributed directly, mail, messenger, WhatsApp. The questionnaire will be distributed to students, School administration and teachers. Semi structured Interview is conducted from students.

2.6 Data Analysis Techniques

Descriptive statistics: mean, percentage change, annual growth/decline rates.

Data Analysis and Findings

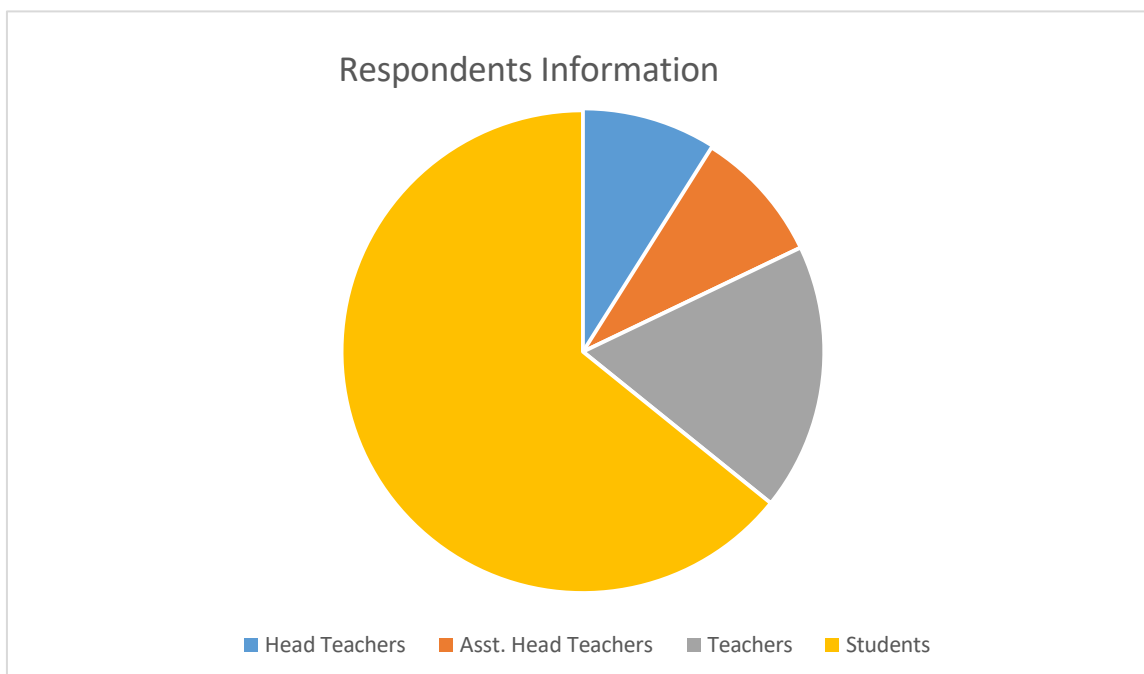
The data were collected and gathered. It was analyzed by using SPSS version 26. The descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data.

Table 1

Respondents Information		
Particulars	Numbers	Percentage
Head Teacher	6	8.95%
Asst. Head teacher	6	8.95%
Teachers	12	17.91%
Students	43	64.19%
Total	67	100

Sources: Survey Report 2026 A. D.

The above table represents the respondent's types and frequencies involve in present research. 8.95 , 8.95,17.91 and 64.19 were the respondents which are Head Teachers, Ass. Head Teachers, Teachers and students. Respectively. Majority of the respondents were chosen students.



The pie diagram also represents the respondents involve in research study. The majority respondents is with yellow color and other are represents in different color.

Table 2

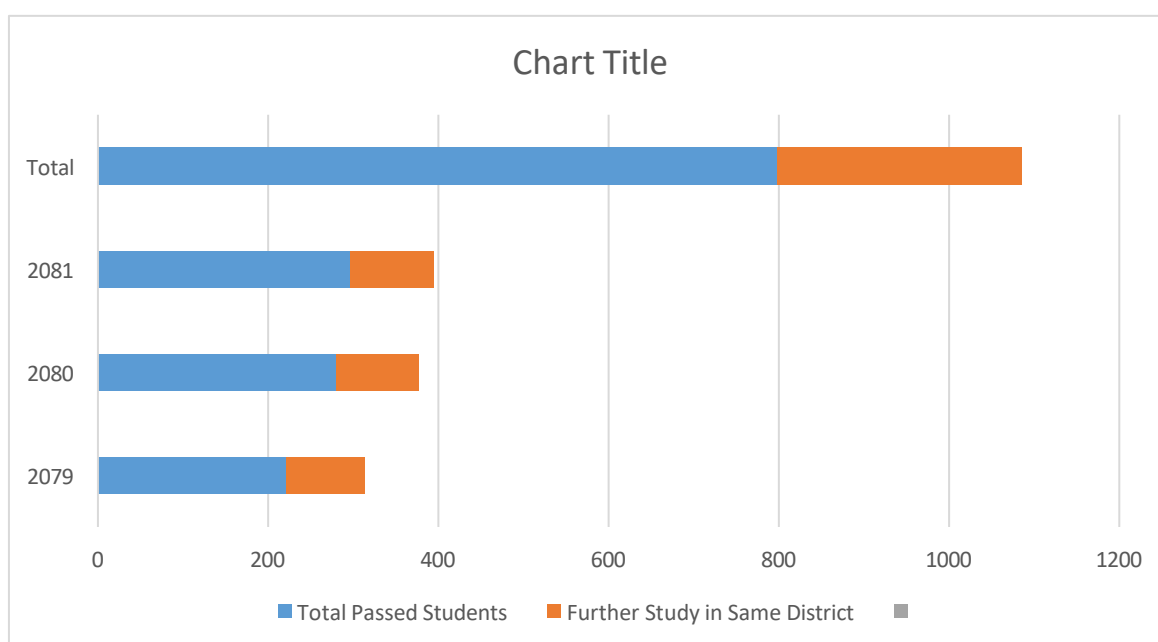
Total Passed Students and Enrollment in Same District

Years	Total Passed Students	Further Study in Same District	Percentage
2079	221	92	41.62%
2080	280	97	34.64%
2081	297	98	32.99%
Total	798	287	35.96% Average

Sources: Survey Report 2026 A. D.

Table 2 represents the total passed students in year 2079, 2080 and 2081 respectively. According to the survey report 41.62% students in 2079 were enroll in for further study in same district but 58.38% were not. Similarly in 2080 and 2082 B.S. 34.64% and 32.99%

students were enroll for further study in same district. The data clearly shows that the enrollment trends for further study in same district are decreasing.



The above multiple bar diagram represent that the students were enroll for further study in same district are comparatively smaller in size than passed students. The same district for further study are decreasing every year.

Table 3;

Years	Total Passed Students	Further Study in Valley and Terai District	Percentage
2079	221	101	45.70%
2080	280	119	42.50%
2081	297	131	44.10%
Total	798	351	43.98%Average

Sources: Survey Report 2026 A. D.

The table shows that the number of students pursuing further studies in Valley and Terai districts increased from **101 in 2079 to 131 in 2081**. However, the percentage fluctuated, decreasing from **45.70% in 2079 to 42.50% in 2080**, before rising to **44.10% in 2081**. Overall, **351 out of 798 passed students (43.98%)** continued their further studies in Valley and Terai districts, indicating that a significant proportion of students prefer to pursue higher education outside their local area.

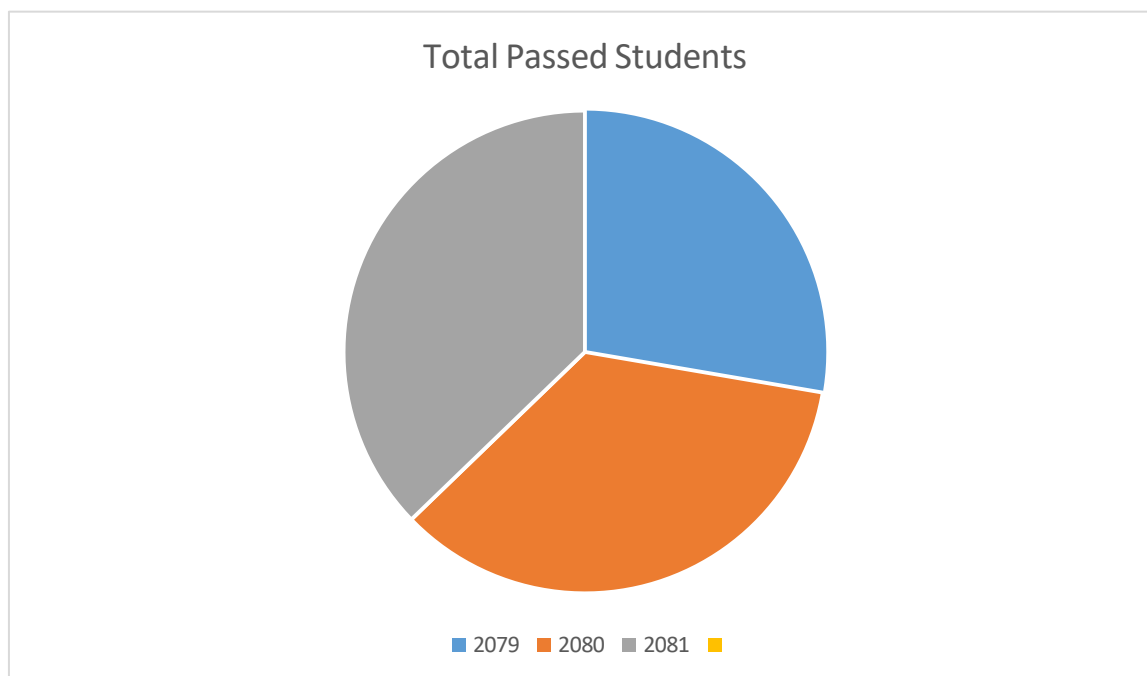


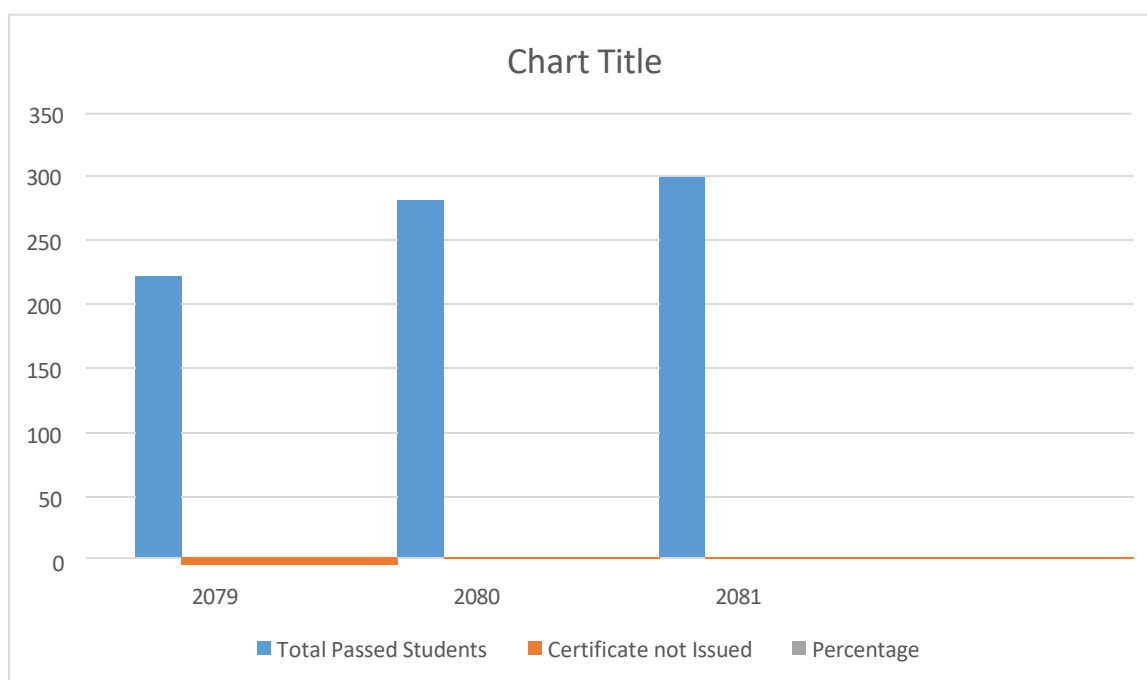
Table 4

Years	Total Passed Students	Certificate not Issued	Percentage
2079	221	5	2.26%
2080	280	10	3.57%
2081	297	11	3.71%
Total	798	26	3.26%Average

S Sources: Survey Report 2026 A. D.

The table shows that the number of students who passed increased from **221 in 2079 to 297 in 2081**. However, the percentage of students whose certificates were not issued also increased from **2.26% in 2079 to 3.71% in 2081**. Overall, **26 out of 798 passed students** had not received their certificates, representing an **average of 3.26%**, indicating a gradual increase in the certificate issuance gap.

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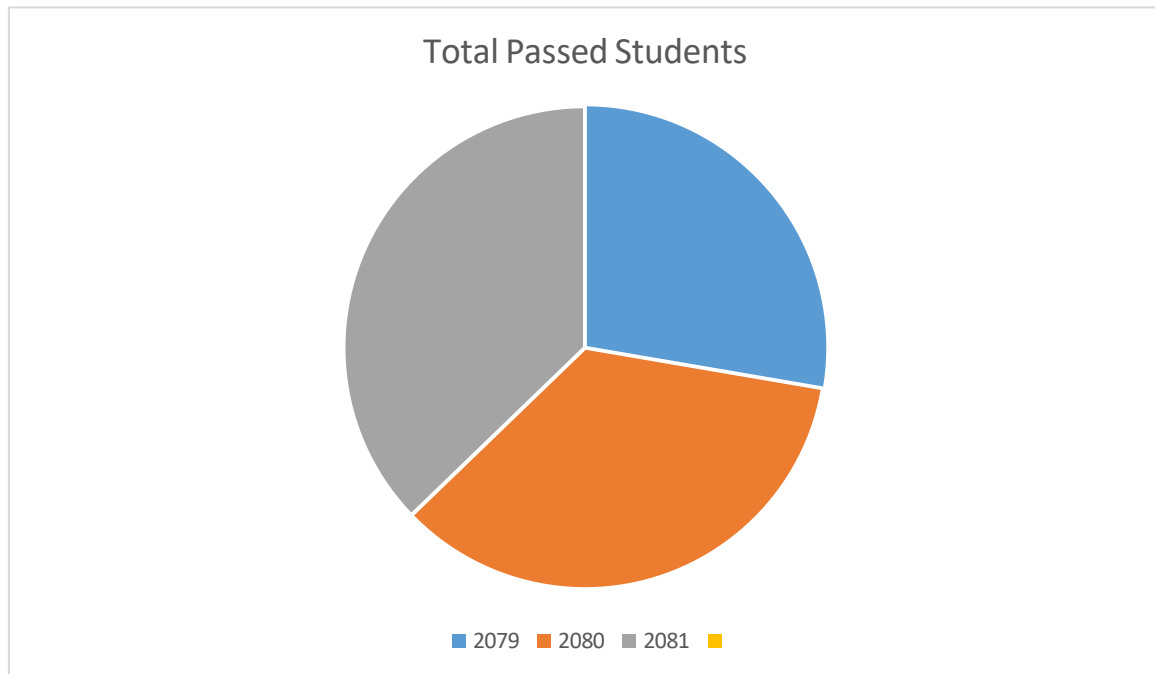
The chart shows that the **total number of passed students increased steadily**, from **221 in 2079 to 280 in 2080 and 297 in 2081**. At the same time, the number of students whose **certificates were not issued increased from 5 to 10 and then 11**, indicating a gradual rise in the certificate issuance gap. Overall, although student pass numbers increased over the three years, the growing number of unissued certificates suggests that the campus should strengthen its certificate distribution and administrative processes.

Table 5

Years	Total Passed Students	Study in Foreign Country and in Process	Percentage
2079	221	11	9.09%
2080	280	9	3.21%
2081	297	13	4.38%
Total	798	33	4.14%

Sources

The table shows that the number of students studying or in the process of going abroad increased from **11 in 2079 to 13 in 2081**, with a decline to 9 in 2080. The corresponding percentage decreased significantly from **9.09% in 2079 to 3.21% in 2080**, before increasing to **4.38% in 2081**. Overall, **33 out of 798 passed students (4.14%)** pursued or were in the process of pursuing studies in foreign countries, indicating a relatively small but notable interest in overseas education.



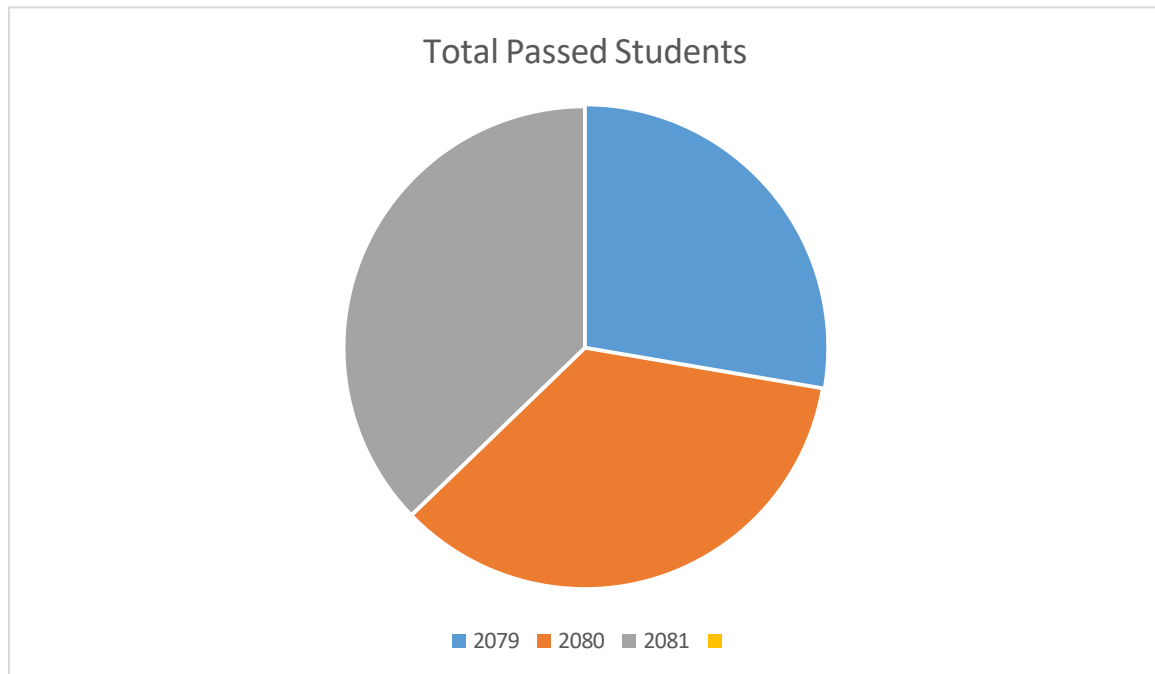
The pie chart illustrates the distribution of **total passed students** over the three academic years. **2079** accounts for **221 students (27.69%)**, while **2080** represents **280 students (35.09%)** and **2081** has the largest share with **297 students (37.22%)**. Overall, the chart shows a **steady increase in the number of passed students**, with 2081 contributing the highest proportion and 2079 the lowest.

Table 6

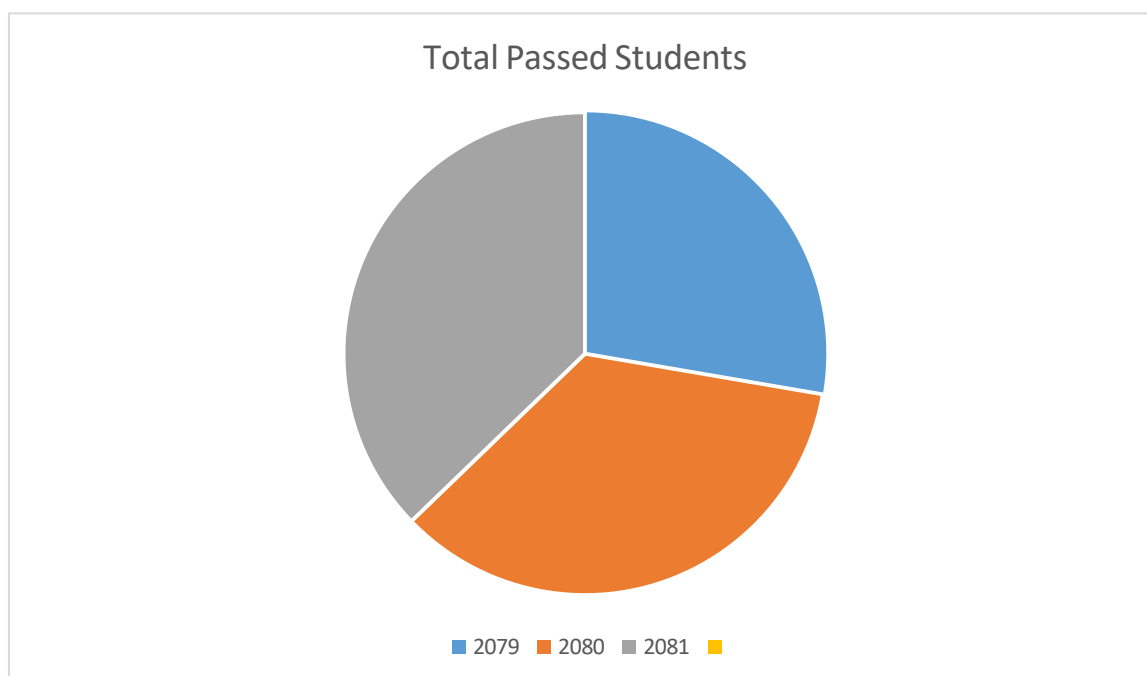
Years	Total Passed Students	Foreign Country For Job	Percentage
2079	221	17	7.69%
2080	280	12	4.29%
2081	297	16	5.38%
Total	798	45	5.63%

Sources: Survey Report 2026 A. D.

The table shows that the number of passed students going to foreign countries for employment fluctuated over the three years, decreasing from **17 in 2079 to 12 in 2080**, before increasing to **16 in 2081**. Similarly, the percentage declined from **7.69% in 2079 to 4.29% in 2080**, and then rose to **5.38% in 2081**. Overall, **45 out of 798 passed students (5.63%)** went abroad for employment, indicating a moderate tendency among graduates to seek job opportunities in foreign countries.



The pie chart shows the distribution of **total passed students** across the three academic years. **2079** represents **221 students (27.69%)**, **2080** represents **280 students (35.09%)**, and **2081** represents the largest share with **297 students (37.22%)**. Overall, the chart indicates a **steady increase in the proportion and number of passed students**, with 2081 recording the highest contribution and 2079 the lowest.



The pie chart presents the distribution of **total passed students** across the three academic years. **2079** accounts for **27.69% (221 students)**, **2080** accounts for **35.09% (280 students)**, and **2081** has the largest share at **37.22% (297 students)**. Overall, the chart indicates a **gradual and consistent increase in the number of passed students**, with 2081 recording the highest proportion.

Table 7:

Students Perception Over going out district for further study

Options/Frequencies	Frequencies	Percentage
Not Suitable Subject	13	30.23%
No Part Time Job	9	20.93%
No availability of Tuition Centre for PSC	12	27.91%
Other Facility	9	20.93%
	43	100%

Sources: Survey Report 2026

The table indicates that **“Not Suitable Subject”** is the most common reason for students going outside the district for further study, reported by **30.23% (13 students)**. This is followed by the **lack of tuition centres for PSC preparation (27.91%, 12 students)**, while **lack of part-time jobs** and **other facilities** each account for **20.93% (9 students)**. Overall, the findings suggest that academic suitability and educational support facilities are the major factors influencing students to pursue further studies outside the district.

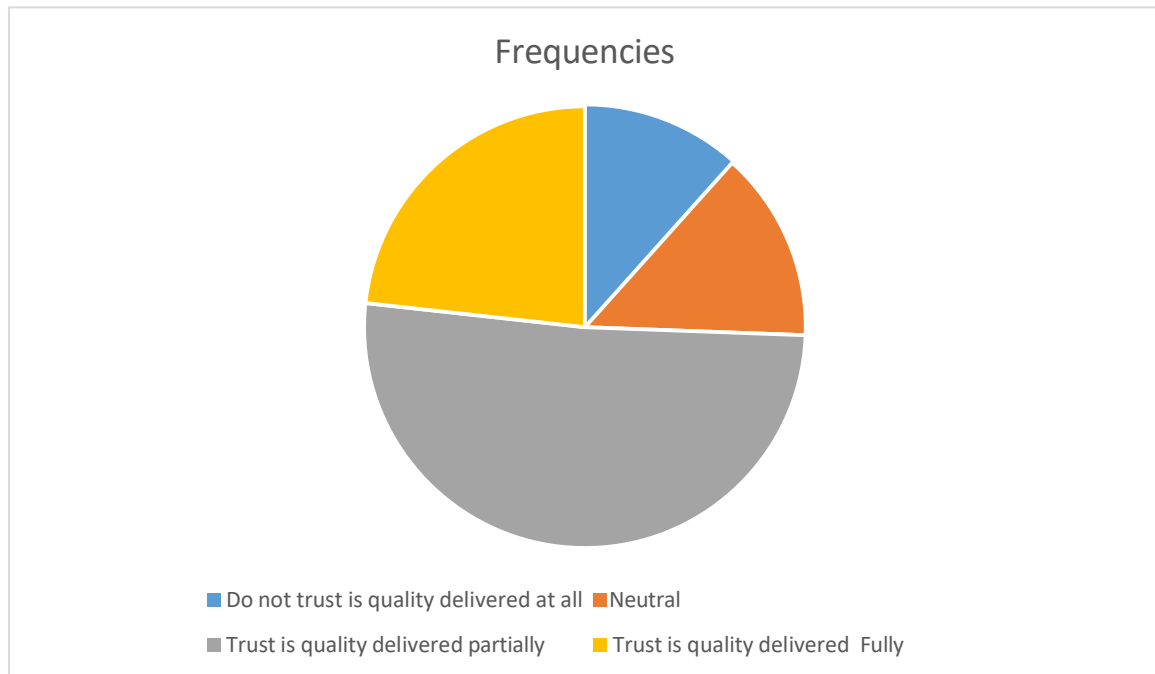
Table 8

Trustworthiness with Campuses in quality

Contents/Frequencies	Frequencies	Percentage
Do not trust is quality delivered at all	5	11.63%
Neutral	6	13.95%
Trust is quality delivered partially	22	51.16%
Trust is quality delivered Fully	10	23.26%
Total	43	100%

Sources: Survey Report 2026

.The table indicates that **51.16% (22 students)** believe that the campus **partially delivers quality**, making it the most common response. Meanwhile, **23.26% (10 students)** fully trust the quality delivered by the campus, while **13.95% (6 students)** remain neutral and **11.63% (5 students)** do not trust the quality delivered at all. Overall, the findings suggest that **74.42% of students have at least some level of trust in the quality delivered by the campus**, although there is considerable scope for improving the quality of educational services.



The pie chart shows that the **largest proportion of respondents (about 50%)** believe that the quality delivered by the campus can be **trusted partially**. Around **23%** of respondents trust the quality **fully**, while approximately **14%** remain **neutral** and **12%** do not trust the quality delivered at all. Overall, the findings indicate that **most students have some level of trust in the quality delivered, but full confidence remains relatively limited.**

Findings of the Research Analysis

- The proportion of students enrolling for further study **within the same district declined over the study period**, from **41.62% in 2079 B.S. to 34.64% in 2080 B.S. and 32.99% in 2081 B.S.**, indicating a decreasing tendency to continue higher education locally.
- A considerable proportion of graduates preferred to pursue further studies in **Valley and Terai districts**, with **351 out of 798 students (43.98%)** continuing their education outside the local area.
- The number of students pursuing further studies in Valley and Terai districts **increased from 101 in 2079 to 131 in 2081**, although the corresponding percentage fluctuated during the study period.
- The findings indicate that **“not suitable subject”** was the major reason for students leaving the district for further studies, accounting for **30.23% (13 students)** of the reported cases.
- The **lack of tuition centres for Public Service Commission (PSC) preparation** was another important factor influencing students to leave the district, reported by **27.91% (12 students)**.
- The study found that **26 out of 798 passed students (3.26%)** had not received their certificates, and the proportion increased from **2.26% in 2079 to 3.71% in 2081**, indicating a growing certificate issuance gap.
- A relatively small proportion of graduates pursued or were preparing to pursue **higher education abroad**, with **33 students (4.14%)** reported over the three-year period.
- Foreign employment was a more common pathway than foreign study, as **45 out of 798 passed students (5.63%)** went abroad for employment during the study period.
- The findings reveal that **51.16% of students partially trusted the quality delivered by the campus**, while **23.26% fully trusted it**, indicating that most students had at least some degree of confidence in the institution's educational quality.
- Overall, the study indicates that **students are increasingly seeking educational and employment opportunities outside the district**, mainly because of unsuitable subject choices and limited educational, career-preparation, employment, and other support facilities available locally.

Discussion and Conclusions

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that the declining number of students in community colleges in the hilly region of Nepal is associated with academic, institutional, and socioeconomic factors. The proportion of students continuing further study within the same district declined from 41.62% in 2079 B.S. to 32.99% in 2081 B.S., while 43.98% pursued further education in Valley and Terai districts. This trend suggests that students are increasingly attracted to institutions outside their local areas. The major reason for migration was the **unsuitability of available subjects (30.23%)**, followed by the **lack of tuition centres for PSC preparation (27.91%)**. Limited employment and other facilities also contributed to students' decisions. Similarly, foreign employment (5.63%) and overseas education (4.14%) indicate additional forms of student outmigration. Although 74.42% of students expressed some level of trust in campus quality, the findings suggest that community colleges need to strengthen academic programs and student support services.

Conclusion

The study concludes that the decreasing enrollment trend is mainly caused by limited and unsuitable academic programs, inadequate career-preparation facilities, limited employment opportunities, and students' growing preference for education and employment outside the district and abroad. To increase future enrollment, community colleges and policymakers should introduce market-oriented and locally relevant programs, improve teaching and learning quality, expand PSC and career counselling services, strengthen infrastructure and student facilities, and establish stronger links between education and employment. These measures can enhance the attractiveness and competitiveness of community colleges in the hilly region of Nepal.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed for higher-level educational institutions, campuses, the government, and local governments to address the declining trend of student enrollment in community colleges in the hilly region of Nepal.

A. Recommendations for Higher-Level Educational Institutions and Campuses

- **Introduce locally relevant and market-oriented academic programs:** Campuses should review existing programs and introduce subjects that match students' interests, local employment opportunities, emerging labour-market demands, and future career prospects, as unsuitable subjects were identified as the major reason for students leaving the district.
- **Expand career counselling and guidance services:** Colleges should establish effective career counselling units to provide students with information about higher education, employment, entrepreneurship, scholarships, and career pathways.
- **Provide PSC and competitive examination preparation:** Since the lack of PSC preparation facilities was a major reason for students leaving the district, campuses should establish affordable coaching and preparation classes within the institution.
- **Improve teaching and learning quality:** Colleges should strengthen faculty development, teaching methodologies, digital learning facilities, practical education, and regular academic monitoring to increase students' confidence in the quality of education.
- **Strengthen student support services and infrastructure:** Libraries, laboratories, ICT facilities, internet services, classrooms, extracurricular activities, and other student-oriented facilities should be improved to make local campuses more attractive and competitive.
- **Develop employment-oriented and practical programs:** Campuses should establish internships, vocational training, entrepreneurship programs, skill-development courses, and partnerships with local organizations to increase students' opportunities for employment after graduation.

- **Strengthen alumni and community engagement:** Colleges should maintain active relationships with alumni and local organizations to create mentoring, internship, scholarship, employment, and career-development opportunities for current students.
- **Improve administrative services:** The increasing gap in certificate distribution indicates the need for efficient administrative procedures. Campuses should ensure timely issuance of certificates, transcripts, and other academic documents.

B. Recommendations for the Government

- **Develop a special policy for hilly-region community colleges:** The government should formulate targeted policies and financial support programs for community colleges in geographically disadvantaged areas to improve academic quality, infrastructure, technology, and student services.
- **Provide adequate financial and human resources:** Additional grants should be provided to colleges in the hilly region for recruiting qualified teachers, upgrading laboratories and libraries, developing ICT facilities, and offering student-support programs.
- **Expand scholarship and financial-support programs:** Government scholarships, fee waivers, and need-based financial assistance should be increased to encourage students from economically disadvantaged families to continue higher education locally.
- **Promote employment opportunities in local areas:** Government agencies should develop employment and entrepreneurship programs that connect graduates with local economic activities, reducing the pressure to migrate to Valley and Terai districts or abroad.
- **Strengthen quality assurance and monitoring:** Regular monitoring and evaluation should be conducted to ensure that community colleges maintain academic standards and provide quality educational services.
- **Ensure timely academic certification:** Relevant government and university authorities should simplify and digitize certificate-related procedures so that graduates receive their academic documents without unnecessary delays.

C. Recommendations for Local Governments

- **Support local community colleges financially and institutionally:** Municipalities and rural municipalities should allocate appropriate budgets to support infrastructure development, ICT facilities, libraries, scholarships, and other educational services.
- **Establish local career and employment centres:** Local governments should coordinate with campuses to provide career counselling, PSC preparation, skill training, entrepreneurship development, and employment information.
- **Develop partnerships with local industries and organizations:** Local governments should facilitate collaboration between colleges and local businesses, cooperatives, NGOs, and other organizations to create internships, part-time employment, and practical learning opportunities.
- **Provide local scholarships and incentives:** Local governments should establish scholarships and incentives for students who choose to pursue higher education in local community colleges, particularly students from disadvantaged and remote communities.
- **Promote the value of local higher education:** Local governments, in coordination with campuses, should conduct awareness programs highlighting the quality, affordability, accessibility, and career opportunities available through local higher education.
- **Establish a joint enrollment-retention strategy:** Local governments, campuses, universities, and community stakeholders should jointly identify the causes of student migration and develop annual action plans to improve enrollment, retention, academic quality, and graduate employment.

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