

## Barriers to Regular Student Attendance in Sociology Programs at Mid-West University, Nepal

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### ABSTRACT

Regular attendance is a crucial factor in students' academic success. However, at Mid-West University (MU) in the Humanities and Social Sciences, irregular attendance among students has been observed. The percentage of students who attend more than 80% of the classes held is zero for undergraduates and only 0.5% for graduates. It is very important to disclose the underlying causes of it. There is no prior research exploring attendance barriers in the context of HSS, MU. Similarly, current institutional policies have not adequately addressed the root causes of student absenteeism. Thus, there is both an empirical and policy research gap. The specific objective of the study is to identify the key barriers that prevent students from attending classes regularly in HSS, MU. The research site for the investigation is the Surkhet district, Karnali Province, based on the programs of HSS and MU. This study has employed a descriptive research design. In-depth interviews and a survey (closed-ended) are the data collection tools. The sample size of the survey is determined based on  $[n = \frac{N}{1+Ne^2}]$  formula where the margin of error is 0.05, in which the sample size (n) is 63. Barriers to students' regular attendance in the Humanities and Social Sciences at MU include socio-economic, institutional, academic, and personal factors. This study has both policy and pedagogical implications, suggesting new structural changes and teaching and learning approaches that could be introduced.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Education is essential not only for every citizen to live with dignity but also for nation-building and the nation's overall progress. Education can be classified into three main categories: basic education, vocational education, and higher education. Education is

fundamental for individual dignity and national development, encompassing basic, vocational, and higher education [1]. In any educational setting, students' regular class attendance plays a vital role in achieving good academic results. University students often exhibit lower attendance rates compared to those in school-level education, due to flexible learning modes and external commitments [2]. Students who attend 80% or more of their classes score 10-15% higher on exams than those with lower attendance [3]. A study in Nepalese universities revealed that only 15% of students meet the 80% attendance rule, partly due to inconsistent enforcement of policies [4].

Despite global progress in education enrollment, 258 million children and youth were out of school in 2018, with attendance rates particularly low in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia due to poverty, conflict, and gender disparities [5]. During the pandemic, 1.3 billion students globally faced disruptions, with 31% unable to access remote learning due to a lack of technology, severely affecting attendance [6].

Mid-West University (MU) is the university that produces higher-level human capital in the fields of Humanities and Social Sciences, Management, Education, Science and Technology, Law, Engineering, and Agriculture and Forestry. If the graduates of MU are competent in the workplace, social transformation is possible, and the expected goal is achieved. Therefore, the university should produce graduates who are qualified.

The semester system has been adopted as the primary approach to teaching and learning worldwide. In this system, one educational year is divided into two sections, each consisting of six months of teaching courses. The learning evaluation of students in each semester is characterised by activities such as quizzes, class debates, class presentations, and project work. The attendance status of the students determines all these things. So, we need to reveal the attendance status of the students at the university.

Student attendance refers to being present at scheduled academic activities, including lectures, tutorials, laboratory sessions, and other instructional activities. It is a critical component of academic engagement that influences students' academic outcomes and institutional accountability. Currently, student attendance in higher education classrooms is generally considered lower than in traditional primary and secondary education, with a significant portion of students attending classes less frequently due to factors like increased flexibility in online learning options, part-time jobs, and a greater focus on independent study in higher education curricula; however, consistent attendance is still important for optimal learning and engagement, and many institutions still enforce attendance policies to a certain degree. Mid-West University, Nepal, has set a rule requiring 80% attendance in each subject to qualify for the semester-end examination. A minimum attendance requirement is in place at The Tribhuvan University, which is 80% of each subject per semester, in order to be eligible for the end-semester examination [7].

University attendance policies may reflect broader societal attitudes toward education. For instance, in some cases, mandatory attendance aligns with a focus on discipline, while in other cases, policies often emphasise independence and responsibility. Attendance is crucial for maintaining learning continuity and achieving success. It fosters interaction, participation, and accountability within the educational process.

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In the graduate school of Humanities and Social Sciences, Mid-West University (HSS, MU), The total percentage of students who attend more than 50% days in a semester is only 16.81% in bachelor's level and 11.8% in master's level and the percentage of students who attend more than 80% days in a semester is zero in bachelor's level and only 0.5% in master's level [8]. It means that the trust in the university as an educational centre is very low.

In the HSS, MU, there is no uniformity in the date of class commencement. In 2017, the master s-level class began in the last week of January. In 2022, it started in the last week of February, and in 2023, it started in the last week of March. There is no uniformity in the class commencement date. A similar irregularity is also observed at the bachelor's level [8]. There is no clear policy on the commencement date of the classes. While the new admission and class start dates of every university in the world are precise, and people all over the world have completed their preparations for admission to the university of their choice in time.

In every university, there needs to be a clear policy on the number of classes that will be taught in one semester. However, in the case of HSS, MU, the number of classes in one semester has varied from 35 hours to 68 hours, even for papers with the same credit hours [8]. All of these factors may be institutional deficiencies that contribute to students' low attendance in the classroom. It is observed that a very low percentage of students attend regular classes, and zero percent of students attend classes on more than 80 percent of the days of the semester.

There is no prior research exploring attendance barriers in the context of HSS, MU. Similarly, current institutional policies have not adequately addressed the root causes of student absenteeism. Thus, there is both an empirical and policy research gap. The objectives of the research are:

- a. To identify the key factors that have been key barriers to the students' regular attendance in the classroom.
- b. To assess the effectiveness of existing institutional policies and strategic interventions for improving students' engagement and participation in the teaching and learning process.

## 2. METHOD

The research site for the investigation is the Surkhet district, Karnali Province, based on the programs of HSS and MU. This study has employed a descriptive research design. The study population is purposively selected to consist of students who have completed at least 2 years of university study at the bachelor's level and one semester of study at the master's level. Thus, the universe of the study (N) is 75 (30 from bachelor's level and 45 from master's level) in which 14 students from bachelor's level sixth semester, 16 students from bachelor's level seventh semester, and the 17 students from master's level fourth semester and 28 students from master's level second semester [9]. The sample size of the survey (n) is 63, which has been determined based on  $[n = \frac{N}{1+Ne^2}]$  formula where the margin of error is 0.05.

A survey (closed-ended) and an in-depth interview have been employed as the data collection tools. A survey (closed-ended) tool has been applied to the respondents who have been the virtual part of this research, whereas an in-depth interview has been conducted with the respondents who are available in person at the university. Respondents who are not available in person at the university have been approached through electronic means. The number of such respondents is 63, which is 84% of the population. Whereas, the students who are available in person at the university have been taken as the respondents for the in-depth interview. The majority of respondents have been approached virtually, as mentioned above, because most students are absent from their regular classes.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1 Background characteristics

Table 1. Background Characteristics of Student Participation in the University (n = 63)

Variable	Category	Frequency (%)
Age (Yrs.)	<23	12 (19.0)
	24 – 28	19 (30.2)
	29 – 33	14 (22.2)
	34 – 38	9 (14.3)
	39<	9 (14.3)
Gender	Male	27 (42.9)
	Female	36 (57.1)
Academic level	Bachelors	25 (39.7)
	Masters	38 (60.3)
Residence	Rural	24 (38.1)
	Urban	39 (61.9)
Cast / Ethnicity	Schedule cast	6 (9.5)
	Ethnic Group	1 (1.6)
	Kshetree	33 (52.4)
	Brahmin	23 (36.5)
Employment at the time of enrollment	Yes	45 (71.4)
	No	18 (28.6)

Table 1 reveals a diverse demographic composition of the university with varying characteristics across different categories. The majority of respondents are in the 24-28 age range, with a slightly higher proportion of females compared to males. Age distribution among respondents indicates that the largest proportion (30.2%) falls within the 24-28 age bracket. This aligns with previous studies, which highlight that postgraduate students often have a delayed entry into higher education due to work or other commitments [10].

Gender representation among the students reveals a slightly higher participation of females (57.1%) compared to males (42.9%). This finding is consistent with global trends where female participation in higher education is increasing, particularly in the humanities

and social sciences [2]. The reasons for this shift could be attributed to policy initiatives promoting gender inclusivity, cultural changes, and increased career aspirations among women [11].

The academic level of students shows that a majority (60.3%) are enrolled in master's programs, while 39.7% are in bachelor's programs. This dominance by master s-level students indicates a growing interest in advanced studies within the Department of Sociology. Prior research suggests that students pursuing postgraduate education are often motivated by career advancement, research interests, and academic aspirations [12].

Most respondents have pursued a master's degree, and a higher proportion reside in urban areas than in rural ones. Ethnically, the sample is predominantly from the Kshetre and Brahmin communities, with a significant proportion being employed at the time of enrollment. These demographic details provide a comprehensive view of the population within the Department of Sociology.

The caste and ethnic composition of the student population shows that the majority belong to the Kshetre (52.4%) and Brahmin (36.5%) communities, while Scheduled Castes (9.5%) and ethnic groups (1.6%) have lower representation. This trend aligns with broader sociological findings in Nepal, where traditional caste hierarchies and socio-economic disparities influence access to higher education [13].

A significant proportion (71.4%) of students were employed at the time of enrollment, indicating that many students balance their studies with professional responsibilities. This pattern reflects the growing prevalence of non-traditional students who seek higher education while managing work commitments [14].

Table 2. Students' attendance status in the classroom (n = 63)

Attendance status	Frequency (%)
Highly regular	14 (22.2)
Somehow regular	17 (27.0)
Rarely present in the classroom	26 (41.3)
Just present at the mid-term exam and class presentation	6 (9.5)

The attendance status data indicates varying levels of student engagement in the classroom. Table 2 indicates that student attendance at Mid-West University is alarmingly low, with a majority of students struggling to maintain regular participation.

Only about one-fifth of the students (22.2%) consistently attend their classes. This suggests that a small proportion of students are fully committed to regular attendance. A slightly higher proportion of students (27.0%) attend classes somewhat regularly, indicating occasional absences but still maintaining some level of participation. The largest proportion of students (41.3%) falls into the category of rarely present, meaning they attend classes infrequently. This suggests that there are significant barriers to regular attendance. A small but notable percentage of students (9.5%) attend class only when necessary for assessments, mid-term examinations, and other purposes, indicating minimal classroom engagement. Stakeholders at the university have failed to instill the belief that classroom attendance is crucial for comprehensive learning. Some students enrol primarily

to obtain certification for job promotion rather than acquiring knowledge, which further diminishes the motivation for regular attendance. Additionally, the irregular attendance of some faculty members themselves sets a negative precedent, reinforcing the perception that attending classes is not essential. Similar findings have been observed in other higher education contexts, where faculty commitment has been found to influence student engagement significantly [15].

Overall, the data suggests that a majority of students (50.8%) struggle with regular attendance, with 41.3% rarely present and 9.5% attending only for assessments. It indicates that the students' regular attendance in the classroom is very poor. This trend could be influenced by factors such as employment, residence, academic pressures, or socio-economic constraints.

### 3.2 Key barriers to the students' regular attendance in the classroom

Table 3. Perceived barriers to regular attendance at the classroom (n = 63)

Category	Perceived barriers	Frequency (%)
Personal barriers	Responsibilities of working at home	15 (23.8)
	Unable to have a stipend while living near the college	1 (1.6)
	Health problem	7 (11.1)
	Personal business and job	33 (52.4)
	Getting married and being away from the university	1 (1.6)
	None of the above	6 (9.5)
Academic environment	The pedagogy followed by the professors is not appropriate	
	Obsolete syllabus	5 (7.9)
	Ineffective intra-class activities (group work/discussion/presentation, etc.)	11 (17.5)
	Non-up-to-date professors	4 (6.3)
	None of the above	5 (7.9)
		38 (60.3)
Social barriers	Decent teacher-student relationship deficit	5 (7.9)
	Decent student-student relationship deficit	5 (7.9)
	None of the above	53 (84.1)
Institutional and structural barriers	Impractical class schedule	1 (1.5)
	Weak physical infrastructure of the college	0 (0.0)
	No policy to increase student attendance	14 (22.2)
	No extracurricular activities and academic counselling	16 (25.4)
	None of the above	32 (50.8)

The most significant barriers to student attendance are "personal business and job commitments" (52.4%) and "household responsibilities" (23.8%). Among institutional barriers, particularly the lack of extracurricular activities and attendance policies (25.4% and 22.2%), also contribute to attendance issues. Similarly, Academic and social barriers appear to be less significant because most students reported no issues in these areas.

Financial difficulties and part-time jobs have led many students to skip classes to work instead [16]. Mental health challenges such as anxiety and burnout contribute significantly to absenteeism [16].

A majority (60.3%) of students reported no issues related to the academic environment, suggesting that factors like teaching methods, syllabus content, and professor engagement are not the primary reasons for irregular attendance. However, 17.5% of students found the syllabus to be outdated, indicating a need for curriculum revision to make it more relevant and engaging. A small percentage of students raised concerns about inappropriate pedagogy (7.9%), ineffective classroom activities (6.3%), and non-updated professors (7.9%), suggesting that while these are not widespread issues, they still impact some students' learning experiences. Increased reliance on recorded lectures post-COVID has reduced the perceived need to attend in person [17]. Students often cite waking up late and peer influence as reasons for not attending [18]. Generation Z learners prefer interactive methods, making traditional lectures less appealing [19]. Students believe they can pass without attending lectures, especially when materials are available online [20].

The data suggest that improving student support services, implementing attendance policies, and addressing financial and job-related struggles could be key to increasing student attendance.

Other factors of perceived barriers to the students' regular attendance in the classroom found during the in-depth interview are as follows:

- a. We are preparing for the Civil Service Commission test for a job, so we have not been able to attend the class.
- b. Lack of maximum use of mechanisms such as cooperation, cohesion, command, communication, and control to enhance students' attendance in the classroom.
- c. The university's stakeholders have failed to ensure that students feel they have learned or understood everything perfectly, only after attending classes regularly.
- d. Some students have sought the certificate merely to advance in their careers rather than for the knowledge it provides.
- e. The university has failed to implement its attendance policy effectively. Consequently, the students' regular attendance rate is not satisfactory.
- f. Another reason for the students' low attendance rate in the classroom is that the teachers themselves are irregular.

Cultural factors, such as traditional gender roles and language barriers, contribute to absenteeism among marginalised groups in South Africa [21]. University-related factors, including faculty competency, fair evaluation, and welfare services, are significant predictors of student absenteeism [22]. Decreased class efficiency, fatigue from previous classes, and inappropriate teaching methods are the top reasons for absenteeism among dental students [23]. Permissive attendance policies, like allowing a certain number of absences without penalty, can inadvertently encourage students to skip classes [23]. Transportation difficulties and long distances from home to campus affect student attendance in higher education institutions [24].

### 3.3 The effectiveness of existing institutional policies and strategic interventions

Table 4. Students' rating of the department (n = 63)

Category	Rating (Assigned value)	Average	Frequency (%)
Educational Quality	Very good (5)	3.73	13 (20.6)
	Good (4)		22 (34.9)
	Fair (3)		26 (41.3)
	Bad (2)		2 (3.2)
	Very bad (1)		0 (0.0)
Administrative delivery	Very good (5)	3.73	13 (20.6)
	Good (4)		23 (36.5)
	Fair (3)		25 (39.7)
	Bad (2)		1 (1.6)
	Very bad (1)		1 (1.6)
Educational environment within the college premises	Very good (5)	3.56	12 (19.0)
	Good (4)		21 (33.3)
	Fair (3)		23 (36.5)
	Bad (2)		4 (6.3)
	Very bad (1)		3 (4.8)

Educational quality and administrative delivery both received a similar average rating (3.73), indicating they are perceived positively but not exceptionally strongly. The educational environment scored slightly lower (3.56), with more negative ratings, suggesting it may need more attention in terms of facilities, student engagement, or campus resources. While students do not express extreme dissatisfaction in any category, the high percentage of "Fair" ratings across all three areas indicates that improvements are needed to move student satisfaction from "average" to "good" or "very good." The analysis of students' ratings suggests that the department's educational quality and administrative delivery are perceived positively; however, further improvements are needed to elevate these ratings even higher. As Table 4 shows, the majority of students rated all categories as "Fair," indicating that there is significant room for improvement within the institution. Research emphasises that timely feedback and results are crucial for maintaining student engagement and attendance [25]. The immediate release of results helps maintain motivation and academic involvement [26]. The educational environment, on the other hand, requires more immediate attention, as it received a relatively lower rating, with a larger percentage of students indicating dissatisfaction. Delays in publishing examination results were found to demotivate students, contributing to lower attendance.

### **3.4 Respondents' responses to enhance students' attendance rate in the classroom**

The following responses have been found to increase students' attendance in the university:

a. Teacher-Student relation

To foster a positive relationship between students and teachers, interactive programs should be held at the university periodically, as a strong relationship between teachers and students is essential. They emphasised the importance of fostering strong relationships between students and teachers through interactive programs and reducing political activities that create hostility and negatively impact student engagement.

b. Unnecessary political activities

Activities like lockouts, often in the name of student politics at the university, have created hostility among students, which ultimately cultivates a negative attitude towards the college among them. Consequently, students' attendance frequency has become low. So, party politicisation on the pretext of a students' welfare campaign should be stopped in the university.

c. Suitable shift of classes

In the semester system, adjustments should be made to the policies and rules in consideration of the students' situation. The class schedule should be taken into account. If there is an environment for studying in the evening, those who are not suitable in the morning may attend in the evening. To increase student attendance in the classroom, the university needs to establish a suitable schedule for studying. Since most students studying are employed or in professions, the university's study schedule should be taken into consideration. Flexibility in the class schedule, including evening sessions, was suggested to accommodate students who are employed.

d. Up-to-date syllabus consisting of scientific courses

Since there are many courses to study but little time to devote to them, most students fail, and the number of students attending classes decreases. A current curriculum consisting of specific content should be developed and followed in each program. The university should offer programs that cater to the needs of the current era, encouraging students to attend regularly. Updating the curriculum to align with current needs and creating a more efficient examination management system were also highlighted.

The respondents provided several key recommendations to enhance students' attendance at the university. Inconsistent academic schedules and unclear class commencement policies can negatively impact student attendance and institutional credibility [27]. Additional suggestions included extending library hours, increasing resource availability, adopting participatory teaching methods, enforcing compulsory attendance, and improving classroom and campus hygiene. The library should be open even on Saturdays as well. There should be a sufficient number of books to read. There should be a sufficient number of books written in the Nepali language. For studying, a sufficient number of books should be issued as per the students' requirements. These

recommendations aim to create a supportive and engaging environment that encourages regular student attendance and academic participation.

The examination management system should create an environment of healthy competition among students. Semester-wise results must be published within a very short span of time. These days, the results of the end-of-semester examination are being published very late, which has distracted students from their university work.

New way of teaching learning activities encouraging students' participation in live discussions and scientific student evaluation approaches should be adopted like prioritise practical learning which includes case studies, research, field work, seminars and workshops, students' involvement in real-life projects, debate, presentation group work; online and flexible learning facilities for working students, proper access to recorded lectures. Other extracurricular activities should be an inseparable part of the learning approach, provided with appropriate educational materials. Teaching should be conducted only by qualified and skilled teachers. The tendency to teach from old students' (Senior batch) notes should be removed.

Establish rules for compulsory classroom attendance and enforce them. A command, control, and communication mechanism should be applied to enhance students' attendance in the classroom. The university should focus on making the evaluation system disciplined and dignified. The system that does not differentiate between students who are absent from class and those who are not should be revised. Long-term plans should be implemented to increase student attendance in the classroom. Different rules should be applied for students who are absent from class and students who are not present. Create an environment that provides good opportunities for regular attendance, allowing students to attend classes consistently. Implement a systematic internal evaluation system on a large scale.

Although the university's basic infrastructure is satisfactory, the hygiene in the classrooms and washrooms is not, so the administration should be more attentive to this factor. The university should periodically update its curriculum. Additionally, it is beneficial to create a schedule that allows for classes on some days of the week and free time on the rest. Methods for earning money while studying should be taught to students.

#### **4 CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, irregular student attendance at the Central Department of Sociology, Mid-West University, is influenced by various personal, academic, social, and institutional barriers. Addressing these issues through improved policies, flexible scheduling, and enhanced student support services is essential for fostering greater engagement and participation. By implementing strategic interventions, the university can create a more conducive learning environment that encourages regular attendance, thereby promoting academic success and overall educational quality.

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