

9. Students with Disabilities of Higher Education in Nepal during a Pandemic

Ruma Manandhar and Uttam Gaulee

Abstract

This mixed-method study explores the conditions of students with disabilities in Nepal during the pandemic. The findings reveal some unique challenges students face with disabilities (SwDs) during the pandemic. The most pressing challenge was identified as the financial challenge. Other challenges included transportation, social and attitudinal issues, and inadequate teaching and learning materials in Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) for SwDs, particularly the incompatibility of the infrastructure of HEIs, with little or no accommodation for STDs. Recommendations are offered for the improvement of an inclusive education environment. Based on the challenges experienced by the participants, some areas need immediate attention, which includes financial support, scholarship, appropriate equipment for the SwDs, special libraries and laboratories for SwDs, disable friendly toilets, awareness, and the unique campaigns for the people of their community, specially trained teachers, Co-operative friends, and families, and Technological and online supports for STDs.

Keywords

Students with disabilities (STDs), Pandemic, Phenomenology, Higher Education Institutes (HEIs), key participants

Introduction

One of the poorest countries recovering from the 2015 earthquakes and a decade-long civil war (1996-2006), Nepal is making rapid progress in development. Nepal is a multi-lingual, multicultural, multi-religious, multi-ethnic country with diverse geography consisting of mountains, hills, and terai (Nidi et al., 2018, p. 3). Poverty in Nepal fell from 46 percent in 1996 to 15 percent in 2011, as measured by the international extreme poverty line (Hadad-Zervos, 2018). However, 7 percent of the urban population and 33 percent of the rural population were multidimensionally poor due to malnutrition and insufficient years of schooling (NPC & OPHI, 2018, p. viii). Importantly, Nepal's higher education does not have a long history (Gaulee, 2014).

People with disabilities in Nepal are one of the most vulnerable and deprived sectors of the population (Prasai & Pant, 2018). Nepal Living

Standard Survey's data show that 29.2 percent of the people with disabilities are physically disabled; 22.3 percent have visual disabilities; 23.4 percent have hearing disabilities; 2.4 percent have vision/hearing-related disabilities; 8.6 percent have speech-related disabilities; 6.8 percent have mental health conditions; and 7.3 percent have multiple disabilities (Holmes et al., 2018, p. 14). The 2011 census found physical disabilities to be the most common (36.3 percent), followed by visual (18.5 percent), deaf or hard of hearing (15.5 percent), speech-related disability (11.5 percent), mental (8.9 percent), multiple disabilities (7.5 percent), and 1.8 percent deaf-blind (USAID, 2017, p. 6).

Nepal was no exception when the COVID-19 outbreak disrupted the world. COVID-19 and its responses have triggered a global crisis that has impacted all areas of life, including people's health, livelihoods, and education. It has exposed existing inequalities in society, with groups who were already marginalized and vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, amongst the most affected (Rohwerder, 2020).

The lead author has a unique perspective on the issue as the spouse of a person with a disability. Facilitating students with disability in higher education is an under-researched area worldwide. While the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) has been increasing access and opportunity for people with disabilities across community life since 1990 (Cook, 1991), Nepal promulgated "The Act Relating to Rights of Persons with Disabilities" only five years ago (Nepal Law Commission, 2017). The preamble of the Nepali law identified the need to respect the civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights of persons with disabilities by doing away with discrimination against them.

Especially in the COVID-19 pandemic, the lives of persons with disabilities are complicated and increasingly more complex. For students with disabilities (STDs), this is emerging as one of the significant causes of university dropouts. In this light, we analyze and unfold the challenges and difficulties faced by SwDs in higher institutions of Nepal during the pandemic and contemplate how we could address those challenges so that SwDs can continue and complete their higher education despite the COVID-19 pandemic.

Literature Review

Literature related to persons with disabilities and focusing on the duration of pandemics in the context of Nepal reveals three broad themes, a) general statutory policies, b) disability and education, and c) experiences of the people with disabilities. Each of these three themes is discussed below.

Statutory Policies Regarding Disability in Nepal

The 2015 Constitution mentions people with disabilities under various rights, including rights to free education up to higher secondary level and

political rights (Eide et al., 2016). Changes in national disability policy reflect a shift from seeing persons with disabilities as passive recipients toward a self-empowerment and rights-based approach (Poudyal et al., 2018, p. 1). Nepal ratified the UNCRPD in 2010 and the 2017 Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act. The Ministry of Women, Children, and Senior Citizens (MoWCSW) and a National Disability Direction Committee are responsible at the national level. In contrast, there should be disability coordination committees (Rohwerder, 2020). Similarly, the 2017 Labour Act and the 2015 National Employment Policy make little mention of persons with disabilities. However, the 2017 Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act ensures nondiscrimination in work and employment. The 1999 Local Self Governance Act provides ward committees with the responsibility of ensuring the livelihoods of persons with disabilities. The act prohibits discrimination and violence based on disability. It gives equal access to individuals with disabilities to education, health, employment, public physical infrastructure, transportation, and information and communication services (Holmes et al., 2018, p. 15; Prasai & Pant, 2018, p. 50, 52, 54-56). Consequently, access to education for children with disabilities has been improved by the 2017 Inclusive Education Policy for Persons with Disabilities and the School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) 2016 - 2023. People with disabilities' health needs are met within the 2014 National Health Policy. The 2018 Safe Motherhood and Reproductive Health Rights Act of Nepal ensures that the services provided are disability-friendly (Rohwerder, 2020). In reality, the impact of these affirmative steps has primarily remained invisible in Nepal, and the concept of disability is still deeply embedded within superstitions and stigma' (Poudyal et al., 2018).

Lack of Access Due to Disability

Tens of thousands of children with disabilities are out of school in Nepal (HRW, 2018; NFDN, 2017). 'Only 41.3 percent of all children with disability are benefiting from some kind of educational opportunities' (Eide et al., 2016, p. 36). Similarly, fewer people with disabilities had accessed the formal education system than people without disabilities (Eide et al., 2016, p. 10). 40.5 percent of persons with disabilities had attended school compared to 71.1 percent of those without disabilities (Eide et al., 2016, p. 97). As many as 59.5 percent of disabled people aged five years old and above were recorded as "never attended school," compared to 29 percent of those without disabilities (Eide et al., 2016, p. 98). In 2016, UNICEF found that 30.6 percent of children with disabilities aged 5 to 12 did not attend school (HRW, 2018). A recent survey of 400 people with disabilities found that 54 percent had no educational qualifications (Samarajiva, 2018, p. 26). The Ministry of Education acknowledges that children with disabilities have the 'largest challenges in access, participation and learning outcomes in the education sector, especially girls with disabilities,

or caste and ethnic group children with disabilities (MoE, 2016). Eide et al. (2019, p. 1) found that ‘increased environmental barriers, higher age, rural location, and increased levels of disability were associated with lower educational achievement.’ Similarly, NFDN (2017, p. 4) expresses concerns about the lack of accessible education for deafblind children. The factors that affected children with disabilities access to and experience in school were complex, often involving a combination of individual, family, school, and societal level factors (Banks et al., 2019, p. 6). Schools have rejected children because they are not accessible or willing to make changes to accommodate children with disabilities (Raut, 2018). There are also reports of ‘incidents of sexual harassment and violence inside schools and institutions, often perpetrated by the staff at these places’ (ACNS et al., 2017, p. 3). There is a lack of adequate, reasonable accommodation for students’ exams, which are primarily mandatory for passing to the next grade or enrolling in high school or a university (HRW, 2018).

Impact of COVID’s-19 on Persons with Disabilities in Nepal

A rapid assessment found that ‘persons with disabilities face significant barriers to protecting themselves and their families from COVID-19 and its broader impacts. Almost half had no protective materials such as masks or soap (HI, 2020, p. 1). On average, 13.1 percent of households with disabilities experienced job loss, compared to 11.3 percent of households without a person with disabilities (Regmi et al., 2020, p. 12-13). The government also recently announced the discontinuation of the provision of the social security incentive for persons with disabilities (blue cardholders), which the Nepal Disabled Women Association (NDWA) objects due, especially given the COVID-19 situation (NDWA, 2020). The negative effects of COVID-19 are compounded for marginalized groups within the disability community, ‘making such populations as indigenous women with disabilities more vulnerable to abuse and extreme hunger and to the coronavirus itself’ (Santos, 2020).

Research Method

A phenomenological approach was used to understand students’ lived experiences with disabilities in higher education during the pandemic. Phenomenological research seeks to describe rather than explain and starts from a perspective free from hypotheses or preconceptions (Husserl, 1970). Hence, phenomenology was a helpful approach in finding what SwDs from Higher Education institutes experienced during the pandemic and finding the challenges and difficulties of SwDs during the health crisis. Four semi-structured and five in-depth interviews were conducted using open-ended questions with participating students with disabilities studying Bachelor’s degrees on different campuses in far-western Nepal.

Table 1: List of campuses and the type of disabilities of the vital participant

S. No.	Name of the Campus	District	No of the Key participants	Type of Disabilities
1	Dadeldhura Multiple Campus	Dadeldhura	1	Visual Impaired
2	Purchased Multiple Campus	Baitadi	1	Physical Disability
3	Jaya Prithivi Campus	Bajhang	1	Physical Disability
4	Darchula Multiple Campus	Darchula	1	Hearing Impaired
5	Bajura Multiple Campus	Bajura	1	Physical Disability
6	Achham Multiple Campus	Achham	1	Visual Impaired
7	Doti Multiple Campus	Doti	1	Physical Disability
8	Kailali Multiple Campus	Kailali	1	Visual Impaired
9	Janajoti Multiple Campus	Kanchanpur	1	Speech impediment
Total			9	

Research site and critical participants

The enrolment of children with disabilities is highest in the far-western region of Nepal (Poudel et al., 2018). The far-western Nepal districts were selected as the research site: Kanchanpur, Kailali, Dadeldhura, Baitadi, Bajhang, Darchula Bajura, Ascham, and Doti. Most of these districts are in remote parts of the country. For this study, all the students enrolled in the different programs at colleges in the province were considered participants in the survey for the field observations. For critical participants, we used a purposeful sample for this study. We selected one campus from each district and one student with disabilities (STDs) from each campus with the help of campus administrators. This is shown in Table 1.

Data Collection Tools and Methods

Interviews with nine participants were the primary source of data. Out of the nine, four were semi-structured interviews, and five were in-depth ones with the key participants. The same interview protocol was used for both types of interviews, but the in-depth interviews were lengthy, with follow-up questions reviewed by professors from special needs education. Interviews were carried out in the Nepali language and digitally recorded and transcribed, and translated in that sequence. The first round of in-person interviews lasted 30-60 minutes. The second round of telephone interviews extended up to two hours. The third round of interviews was conducted for member-checking. To facilitate these conversations, the researcher had to transfer mobile credit to the participants to avoid the

cost of maintaining a network connection. NRS 100 to 300 per person was spent (~ \$1 - \$2.60).

The first author met the participants during a field visit. Initial conversations were limited to sharing pleasantries and building rapport with some participants. For example, the author helped a participant by driving her to get to her apartment and taking her grocery shopping, which was a big help for the participant. Sharing a meal with some of them was also an opportunity to get to know them better. Initial contact was made with the participants during Spring 2021 when the lead author visited the nine districts of the far-western province. Kanchanpur, Kailali, Dadeldhura, Baitadi, Bajhang, Darchula, Bajura, Ascham, and Doti. Individuals who showed a willingness to participate provided their phone numbers to be contacted later. Subsequently, two rounds of interviews over the phone were conducted.

After reviewing the first draft of data transcription, and preliminary data analysis, more data was collected via phone interviews during the summer of 2021 from all districts identified in the study to capture more valid data based on lived experiences as shared by the key respondents. After the second round of interviews, the researcher was in touch with the key participants for member-checking. Consulted participants were shown the transcripts, and any ambiguity in the information was also clarified during this round of conversations. Relevant excerpts from the key participants' live experiences were drawn and categorized under several potential subheadings.

Results

After carefully analyzing the transcripts of four semi-structured and in-depth interview transcripts, five themes emerged, revealing the five challenges of students with disabilities (STDs) throughout the pandemic. Each of the five themes is described below as they capture the descriptions of the challenges and difficulties experienced by the participants while navigating through the COVID-19 pandemic.

Lack of Support

Persons with disabilities felt that they were the forgotten ones during the pandemic. A sense of lack and absence of support was one of the most recurring themes. The below excerpt from a critical participant sums up this theme.

“I have not gotten any support from anybody. The economic condition of the family is so poor. My father goes to India to manage our food. It is too difficult for me to walk as I still have not received any sticks anywhere. If someone provides me a white stick, that will help me.” Ram (visually impaired, a key participant from Dadeldhura Multiple Campus)

As the institutions and the entire nation struggled to provide support to its citizens, students with disabilities (SWD) from Higher Education institutions (HEI), who would need even more help and care, did not receive any support from the public agencies and institutions.

Transportation

Another key challenge was transportation. While transportation, in general, came to a screeching halt as the nation imposed a lockdown during the pandemic, students with disabilities suffered more, particularly those with challenges with mobility. Suman, a participant with a physical disability from Baitadi (Purchaudi Multiple campuses, with a leg problem, described this to the first author when she visited him in his own rented home -

“My home is so far from here. Even people without disabilities have to walk 3 hours to reach my home from here. ...So, it is not possible every day to come to campus from home. So, you know I’m here in a rented room. Due to the pandemic, life is difficult for me ...I’m unable to pay my rent.... Before the pandemic, my father offered all my expenditures. He worked in India as a laborer, but during the pandemic, he came back home...now my whole family is in a financial crisis.”

This excerpt indicates transportation problems and the financial status of STDs in higher education. If the state could manage higher education via distance and online mode, such students could pursue their higher education from the comfort of their own homes. That would be a great help for them. Another critical participant, SwDs from Jay Prithvi Campus, Bajura (who lost his legs in childhood when he went to play near his home by blasting the bomb during the civil war period of Nepal) said:

“ ...life is always difficult for a person with disabilitiesnot only in the pandemic period....I want the job after my study....let’s see....but at the moment I need a wheelchair So that I can move here and there.”

This final excerpt highlights the difficulty of navigating the distance, particularly in the uneven terrains of the hilly province.

“I’m working for a local NGO. On the other hand, the distance between my home and campus is two hours walking distance. Going to campus means walking a minimum 4 hours daily.”

Social Attitude

The general public’s fatalistic view contributes to a slanted attitude toward the disabled is problematic. The next voice of the voiceless key participant

(a hearing impaired) from Darchula Multiple Campus, Darchula expressed her feeling: “...*There is less discrimination on the campuses but more in the villages.* (Key participant (a hearing impaired) from Darchula Multiple Campus, Darchula). In many cases, it was found that Their own family did not even support was. In the course of the data collection, here is one more voice from Kanchanpur:

... I feel People do not like me. People laugh at me....I am deceiving and troubling my family and community.(boy with a speech impediment)

This excerpt reflected that people make fun with disabilities and still exist discrimination in society.

Lack of Equipment and Accommodation

Lack of equipment and accommodation is another pain point. For instance: Social discrimination, Unavailability of Braille books, Materials for Sign languages, wheelchairs, and even the white stick. Shortage of expert teachers in special needs education in the Higher Education Institutes of Nepal.

I expect one hostel in Doti on Multiple campuses. If there is no internet access problem, I would like to join Nepal Open University. Unfortunately, due to geographical constraints, the lack of internet access, and Telecom network access....it is also impossible for me!”

A woman participant summed up when she said -

“Even though the main problem sounds like it is an economic problem, more important ones are. For example, a problem for girls like us is the language problem. We do not have teachers who know about sign language. Another thing is that we do not have learning materials suitable to us.”

Financial Hardship

A heart-touching excerpt drawn from the in-depth interview of one of the key participants from Acham Multiple Campus, Mangalsen said:

“...I do not know what to say and how my study is going on this pandemic situation..... I have not paid my rent since the luck-down began....My stepmother does not allow me to enter the home, and my father has not met me for 14 years....my study is going on with the help of teachers and friends...my life is going on with the mercy of some local donors”.

One excerpt from the Doti multiple campuses, who has only one hand by birth, said:

“...all the difficulties are not only from the COVID-19 pandemic... what to do sharing my pain and problems with others?... I’m sad. I could not regularly attend my classes on campus because I had to give time to my job. Eight years ago, my mother died after falling down a hill when she went to collect grass for the cattle. I have to take care of my two sisters and one brother from that time. My father works (like daily wages works) in Uttar Pradesh, India. He did not re-marriage, but his income is not sufficient. During this pandemic time, he is at home our financial condition has worsened.

During the pandemic, some students with disabilities were doing part-time jobs to continue studying.

Before the pandemic, I used to work in a restaurant at Dhangadhi. My duty was to wash the dishes during the night from 10 pm to 5 am... I have a visual problem, so I could not get a job during the usual time.....unfortunately due to the COVID-19 problem, the restaurant was closed, and I also lost my job...in such a measurable condition, the teachers of Kailali Multiple Campus helped me by providing me a job in Kailali FM Radio. ...Now I’m working as an anchor I’m so happy.....the pay I’m getting from here is ok to continue my study. Hari (Visual impaired, Kailali)

The critical participant with physical disabilities from the Bajura district (Bajura Multiple campuses) said:

“during the COVID-19 pandemic, I got Rs. 10,000 from the NGO....this help only due to pandemics, not always.... That was great..... I expect such type of financial support if possible in future too regularly....Because I feel that neither will I get a job after nor will I be able to do any future position in the future..... It would be better to have a hostel in Bajura on Multiple campuses so that students like me should not rent a room to study.

Conclusion

The scantily available literature on this topic documents that persons with disability have a hard life in Nepal. For example, Lamichhane (2013) studied high school students and found that people with visual and hearing impairments faced inadequate support systems in schools. Many others with physical impairments had to brave the challenges caused by physical barriers or just stay away from education. This study found that students in the Far Western part of Nepal are compelled to drop out of the campuses without the support that would sustain their higher education. Many students with disabilities (STDs) have been obliged to drop out because they could not get good help from their family members and societies. While

the Department of Education has identified people with disability as one of the target groups of its inclusive education policies, along with girls, Janajati children (ethnic and linguistic groups), street children, and others (Thapalia, 2016; Maudslay, 2014), there is much to be done toward creating an inclusive education environment. Some of the ideas for consideration could be financial support in scholarships and stipends, technical support, appropriate and adequate equipment and devices for the students with disabilities—special accommodation facilities such as libraries, laboratories, and lavatories. Most importantly, awareness and the unique campaigns to the people of their community, specially trained teachers, cooperative friends, and families.

When asked what would make a real difference in their lives, here are a few ideas that participants themselves verbalized. These expectations can be summed in terms of the following points:

- *An Expectation of the textbooks and other study materials*
- *Opportunities for equal access*
- *Awareness-raising programs*
- *Scholarship managements*
- *Disabled friendly teachers and classes*
- *Establishment of libraries (e-labs)*
- *Online classes (to reduce the transportation challenges)*
- *Additional time management for the disabled (esp. in the exams)*
- *Free education and textbooks from the university*
- *Management of separate teacher*
- *Skill learning for living/survival*
- *Special training*
- *Disability-friendly curriculum*

For this, joint efforts are to be made by the universities, national agencies, and other concerned stakeholders in collaboration with the international partners. In this case, Nepal Open University, as an institution touted as democratizing higher education, could play an important role. Moreover, this is the only university established to promote education in Nepal's open and distance mode. This is because the students out of the higher education stream can be brought to the classes more quickly through this mode of teaching/learning. Hence, we invite the policymakers to listen to this population, who are experiencing the impact of various forces simultaneously and are left out to fend for themselves.

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Authors

Ruma Manandhar, Nepal Open University, Nepal. Assistant Professor at Nepal Open University. She has more than ten years of teaching, including experience in Higher Education and online and distance modes of educational delivery systems. I have been developing curriculum and courses in Open and Distance mode. Recently, she worked with r Podcasts in Education.

Uttam Gaulee, Ph.D., is a trusted leader in American higher education. A policy analyst, author, and keynote speaker, Dr. Gaulee currently serves as a professor in the advanced studies, leadership, and policy department at Morgan State University. He served as the Chair of the University Council at his institution from 2019 to 2021 and played a pivotal role in cultivating an effective relationship between the faculty and the administration. With a strong understanding of shared governance and the necessity of shared excitement towards a common goal, he established a research and creative activities committee within the University Council geared to generate a joint effort toward elevating the institution to a higher level of research activity. As a DEI champion, he advocated for the faculty and introduced the principle of fairness in the institution as the entire industry of higher education suffered financially during the pandemic. His research agenda intersect international higher education systems, diaspora studies, interdisciplinary perspectives on education policy, global citizenship, and cross-cultural issues in international development and geopolitics. Dr. Gaulee advocates community college as a vehicle for social progress and economic development in and beyond the United States. He recently edited a volume on *Global Adaptations of Community College Infrastructure*.