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STUDENT ATTRITION IN POST-COVID RURAL HIGHER EDUCATION: A LONGITUDINAL INSTITUTIONAL CASE STUDY OF A B.A. PROGRAMME IN WEST BENGAL, INDIA

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Abstract

Student retention and successful completion are essential dimensions of equitable and inclusive higher education. Although access to undergraduate education has expanded, ensuring that students remain enrolled and complete their programmes continues to be an important institutional challenge. This study examines student attrition in a three-year Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) programme at a general degree college in rural West Bengal, India, focusing on a cohort admitted in July 2022 during the post-COVID period. The study adopts a descriptive longitudinal institutional case-study design based on administrative data covering six semesters, from July 2022 to January 2025, and final course outcomes recorded in June 2025. Of the 441 students admitted to the programme, including Honours and General students, 88 completed the course, while 353 were reported to have dropped out. The calculated completion rate was 19.95%, and the dropout rate was 80.05% when conventionally rounded to two decimal places. Semester-wise records indicate substantial reductions in recorded student numbers, particularly between Semesters I and II and between Semesters V and VI. The findings identify a serious student-retention concern within the institution. However, the study does not establish the causes of attrition or demonstrate a causal relationship between the COVID-19 pandemic and student dropout. It recommends systematic student tracking, academic mentoring, targeted support, confidential exit surveys, and comparative longitudinal research to improve undergraduate retention and completion in rural higher education.

Keywords: *Student attrition, student dropout, student retention, post-COVID education*

Introduction

Higher education contributes to individual development, social mobility, economic advancement, and the development of an informed and skilled population. Undergraduate education provides learners with opportunities to acquire disciplinary knowledge, develop analytical and communication skills, and prepare for employment, further education, and responsible citizenship. However, the educational benefits of admission can be fully realised only when students receive appropriate opportunities and support to continue their studies and complete their programmes.

Student attrition, commonly understood as the discontinuation of study before the completion of a programme, remains an important concern in higher education. A substantial gap between initial enrolment and final completion may indicate difficulties in academic progression, student engagement, institutional support, or the wider circumstances in which students pursue their education. Nevertheless, dropout is a complex phenomenon, and its causes cannot be established solely from changes in enrolment figures.

The issue is particularly important in rural higher education institutions, which serve students from varied educational, economic, and social backgrounds. Some students may face financial constraints, family responsibilities, employment commitments, transport difficulties, limited access to learning resources, or challenges in adapting to college-level study. These circumstances may affect educational participation in different ways. Their actual influence must be investigated through appropriate evidence rather than presumed from students' rural background alone.

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced significant disruptions to educational systems worldwide. Educational institutions adopted online and alternative teaching arrangements to maintain educational continuity, but unequal access to digital devices, internet connectivity, and suitable learning environments created difficulties for many learners. UNESCO documented how the pandemic exposed and intensified existing educational inequalities and highlighted the need for inclusive recovery strategies (UNESCO,

2021). These developments make the post-pandemic period an important context for examining student progression. However, the presence of a post-pandemic context does not, by itself, establish that the pandemic caused subsequent dropout.

In India, the National Education Policy 2020 emphasises equitable access, inclusion, student support, counselling, and appropriate assistance for students from rural and socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds (Ministry of Education, 2020). The All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) also provides a national framework for monitoring higher education enrolment, institutional characteristics, and other educational indicators (Ministry of Education, 2024). These policy and statistical frameworks underscore the importance of examining not only access to higher education but also the conditions supporting students' continued participation and successful completion.

Against this background, the present study examines a cohort of 441 students, comprising Honours and General students, admitted to the B.A. programme at a general degree college in rural West Bengal in July 2022. The semester-wise administrative records extend from Semester I in July 2022 to Semester VI in January 2025, while the final course outcomes were recorded in June 2025.

Of the initial 441 students, only 88 completed the three-year course, whereas 353 were reported to have dropped out. This substantial difference between initial admission and final completion provides the basis for an institutional case study of student attrition.

The study is designed to document the pattern and extent of the reported dropout, identify stages at which recorded student numbers declined substantially, and consider implications for institutional retention strategies. It does not seek to attribute the observed pattern to any single cause. Instead, it treats the findings as a basis for further investigation into academic, socioeconomic, personal, and institutional factors that may influence undergraduate continuation.

Objectives of the Study: The study has the following objectives:

1. To examine the semester-wise pattern of recorded student numbers in the B.A. programme.
2. To calculate the reported completion and dropout rates of the cohort admitted in July 2022.
3. To identify the stages at which the largest reductions in recorded student numbers occurred.
4. To interpret the findings within the context of student retention in rural higher education during the post-COVID period.
5. To identify implications for institutional student tracking and academic support.
6. To suggest measures for improving student continuation and successful completion.
7. To identify areas requiring further student-level and comparative research.

Research Questions: The study addresses the following questions:

1. How did the recorded number of students change across the six semesters?
2. What proportion of the initial cohort completed the three-year B.A. programme?
3. What was the reported extent of dropout in the cohort?
4. Between which successive semesters were the largest reductions in recorded student numbers observed?
5. What institutional measures could be considered to improve student retention?
6. What additional evidence is required to explain the causes of attrition?

Methodology

Research Design: The study adopts a descriptive longitudinal institutional case-study design. It examines administrative records relating to a defined cohort of students over the duration of a three-year undergraduate programme.

The longitudinal component consists of semester-wise recorded student numbers from July 2022 to January 2025, together with final course outcomes recorded in June 2025. The institutional case-study approach allows the researcher to examine the pattern of attrition within its specific educational setting.

The study is descriptive rather than experimental or causal. It does not test whether the COVID-19 pandemic, rural residence, financial hardship, academic difficulty, or any other factor caused student dropout.

Study Setting: The study was conducted in the context of a general degree college situated in rural West Bengal, India. The programme under investigation is the three-year Bachelor of Arts course, comprising both Honours and General students.

Population and Cohort: The cohort consisted of 441 students admitted to B.A. Semester I in July 2022. This initial enrolment served as the reference population for the calculation of the reported completion and dropout rates.

Sources of Data: The study uses the semester-wise administrative figures collected by the researcher. The records cover the following stages:

Academic stage	Month and year	Recorded number
B.A. Semester I	July 2022	441
B.A. Semester II	January 2023	319
B.A. Semester III	July 2023	245
B.A. Semester IV	January 2024	224
B.A. Semester V	July 2024	209
B.A. Semester VI	January 2025	117
Completed the course	June 2025	88
Reported dropout during the course	By June 2025	353

Data Analysis

The study uses descriptive statistical analysis, including frequencies, percentages, absolute differences, and comparisons between successive semester counts.
The completion rate is calculated as:

$$\text{Completion rate} = \frac{\text{Number of completers}}{\text{Initial cohort}} \text{ x } 100$$

The dropout rate is calculated as:

$$\text{Dropout rate} = \frac{\text{Number of reported dropouts}}{\text{Initial cohort}} \text{ x } 100$$

The proportional decline between successive semester counts is calculated as:

$$\text{Decline (\%)}\} = \frac{\text{Previous count} - \text{Subsequent count}}{\text{Previous count}} \text{ x } 100$$

The initial cohort of 441 students is used as the denominator for overall completion and dropout rates. For semester-to-semester changes, the previous semester's recorded count is used as the denominator.

Operational Definition of Dropout: For this paper, dropout refers to the students classified in the supplied administrative data as having discontinued the programme before completing the three-year course.

Results and Analysis

Semester-wise Student Progression

Table 1: Recorded student numbers across the six semesters

Academic stage	Recorded Students	Percentage of initial cohort
B.A. Semester I	441	100%
B.A. Semester II	319	72.34%
B.A. Semester III	245	55.56%
B.A. Semester IV	224	50.79%
B.A. Semester V	209	47.39%
B.A. Semester VI	117	26.53%

Table 1 shows a consistent decline in the recorded number of students across the six semesters. The initial count of 441 students fell to 319 in Semester II, equivalent to 72.34% of the initial cohort. The recorded number declined further to 245 in Semester III and 224 in Semester IV.
By Semester V, the recorded count had reached 209, representing 47.39% of initial enrolment. The Semester VI figure was 117, equivalent to 26.53% of the original cohort.
These figures demonstrate that the number of students recorded at successive semester stages decreased substantially over the duration of the programme. However, the percentages represent recorded counts relative to initial enrolment; they should not be treated as independently verified retention rates unless student-level records confirm that the same cohort is being tracked consistently at each stage.

Changes between Successive Semesters

Table 2: Absolute and proportional changes in recorded student numbers

Transition	Previous Count	Subsequent Count	Absolute Reduction	Reduction as percentage of previous count
B.A. Semester I to II	441	319	122	27.66%
B.A. Semester II to III	319	245	74	23.20%
B.A. Semester III to IV	245	224	21	8.75%
B.A. Semester IV to V	224	209	15	6.70%
B.A. Semester V to VI	209	117	92	44.02%

The largest absolute reduction between successive semester counts occurred between Semester I and Semester II, when the recorded number declined by 122 students. This represented 27.66% of the Semester I count.
The second-largest absolute reduction occurred between Semesters V and VI, when the count declined by 92 students. This was the largest proportional reduction between successive semesters, at 44.02%.
The reduction between Semesters II and III was 74 students, or 23.20%. In contrast, the reductions between Semesters III and IV and between Semesters IV and V were relatively smaller, at 8.57% and 6.70%, respectively.
The pattern suggests that the recorded decline was concentrated particularly at the beginning of the programme and during the transition from Semester V to Semester VI. These stages should be prioritised for further examination of student registration, academic progression, and discontinuation records.
The figures do not establish why the reductions occurred. They identify points of substantial change that require additional investigation.

Final Completion and Dropout Outcomes

Table 3: Final outcomes of the cohort admitted in July 2022

Outcome	Number of students	Percentage of initial cohort
Completed the three-year course	88	19.95%
Reported dropout during the course	353	80.05%
Total initial cohort	441	100.00%

Table 3 presents the final outcome of the initial cohort. Of the 441 students admitted in July 2022, 88 completed the course, while 353 were reported as having dropped out.

The calculated completion rate was approximately 19.95%, while the dropout rate was approximately 80.05%. The two categories together account for the entire cohort.

The figures indicate a substantial gap between initial admission and successful course completion. Fewer than one in five students in the original cohort completed the programme according to the supplied records.

The outcome figures should be interpreted as reported administrative classifications. Their validity depends on whether the institution has consistently distinguished permanent dropout from transfer, temporary interruption, delayed progression, and other circumstances.

Relationship between Semester Counts and Final Outcomes

The semester-wise figures and final outcomes provide complementary information. The Semester VI count was 117, whereas the final completion count was 88. The difference is 29 students.

This difference indicates that the Semester VI count and final completion count represent distinct stages of the academic process. The precise status of the 29 students should be verified before interpreting the difference as a confirmed dropout figure for the final transition.

Similarly, the semester-wise reductions should not be summed and treated as independent dropout events, because the same student may be absent from more than one subsequent semester count. The overall dropout estimate should be based on the verified final classification of the original cohort, not on the cumulative addition of semester-to-semester reductions.

The reported final outcome totals are internally consistent because 88 completers plus 353 reported dropouts equal 441 initial students. However, the detailed progression records should still be reconciled with the final outcomes to ensure a reliable longitudinal account.

Discussion

The Extent of Attrition in the Institutional Case

The principal finding is that 353 of the 441 students admitted to the B.A. programme were reported to have dropped out before completion. The calculated dropout rate of approximately 80.05% indicates a serious retention concern within the cohort.

The finding is important because the success of higher education depends not only on providing access but also on enabling students to continue learning and complete their qualifications. Where a large proportion of an admitted cohort does not complete its programme, institutions should examine both student circumstances and the educational environment.

Tinto's work highlights the importance of students' academic experiences, their engagement with institutional life, and the development of supportive educational communities in understanding college departure (Tinto, 1993). This perspective suggests that retention should be approached as an institutional as well as an individual concern.

Nevertheless, the present study does not include evidence about academic integration, social participation, student satisfaction, or institutional relationships. Tinto's framework therefore provides a useful basis for interpreting the importance of retention, but it does not establish the causes of dropout in this particular college.

Attrition during the Early Semester Transition

The decline from 441 students in Semester I to 319 in Semester II is the largest absolute reduction between successive semester counts. This finding suggests that the transition from initial admission to the second semester deserves particular attention.

The college could examine attendance, examination participation, semester registration, academic performance, and the status of students who were not recorded in Semester II. Student follow-up could help determine whether the reduction reflects permanent discontinuation, delayed progression, administrative circumstances, or other reasons.

Potential explanatory factors include financial difficulties, family responsibilities, employment commitments, academic adjustment, transport challenges, and limited access to learning resources. These are hypotheses for investigation rather than findings established by the current dataset.

Relative Stability during the Middle Semesters

The recorded counts declined by comparatively smaller amounts between Semesters III and IV and between Semesters IV and V. This suggests that the middle-semester counts were relatively more stable than those observed at the beginning and near the end of the programme.

However, smaller reductions do not necessarily imply that students experienced no difficulties. Some students may have continued despite academic or personal challenges. Others may have been absent from particular records without permanently leaving the programme.

Institutional monitoring should therefore extend beyond counting registrations. Regular communication with students, mentoring, attendance monitoring, and academic guidance may help identify problems before they lead to discontinuation.

The Decline between Semesters V and VI

The decrease from 209 students in Semester V to 117 in Semester VI is particularly notable. The reduction of 92 students represents approximately 44.02% of the Semester V count.

This stage should be examined through a detailed review of registration records, academic eligibility, examination participation, and the status of students who did not appear in the Semester VI count. Such an investigation could clarify whether the observed decline represents permanent dropout, delayed progression, or differences in the administrative records.

The additional difference between the Semester VI count and final completion count also merits verification. A reliable institutional tracking system should make it possible to identify the final status of each student in the original cohort without disclosing personal information in published results.

The Post-COVID Context

The cohort entered the programme in July 2022, following the major period of COVID-19 educational disruption. The timing makes the case relevant to questions about educational continuity and recovery. UNESCO's work on pandemic-related educational disruption documented inequalities in access to remote learning and the risks faced by learners with limited technological resources (UNESCO, 2020, 2021). The National Education Policy 2020 also emphasises the importance of inclusion, counselling, and support for rural and socioeconomically disadvantaged students (Ministry of Education, 2020).

These sources establish the broader relevance of examining educational participation and student support during the post-pandemic period. They do not establish that the pandemic caused the dropout observed in the present cohort.

The current study contains no pre-pandemic comparison cohort, no information on students' experiences during school or college closures, and no individual measures of digital access, economic hardship, or learning disruption. It would therefore be inappropriate to attribute the high dropout rate to COVID-19. A stronger investigation of pandemic-related effects would require comparison with other admission cohorts, information about students' experiences, and a design capable of distinguishing pandemic-related influences from other explanations.

Implications for Rural Higher Education

The findings raise important questions about student continuation in the institution under study. They also demonstrate why rural higher education institutions may benefit from systematic monitoring and context-sensitive support. However, the study cannot establish that the dropout rate is representative of rural colleges generally. Nor can it determine whether rural residence, socioeconomic circumstances, institutional facilities, or other factors were responsible for the observed attrition.

Further research should investigate these factors directly. Such research could help the college identify which forms of support are most relevant to its students and whether particular interventions are associated with improved retention.

Scope for Further Research

Further research could build on this institutional case study in several ways.

First, a student-level longitudinal study could trace individual progression from initial admission to completion or verified discontinuation. This would provide a more precise account of the timing and nature of dropout.

Second, a mixed-methods study could combine administrative data with interviews and questionnaires involving current students, former students, teachers, and college administrators. Such research could identify the circumstances associated with continuation and discontinuation.

Third, a comparative study involving rural and urban colleges could examine whether progression patterns differ across institutional settings. Such comparisons would require consistent definitions and comparable cohort data.

Fourth, research involving successive admission cohorts could help determine whether the 2022 cohort represents a continuing institutional pattern or a specific case.

Fifth, studies could evaluate the effectiveness of early-warning systems, academic mentoring, remedial teaching, financial guidance, and counselling in improving retention and completion.

Finally, a study specifically examining pandemic-related effects would require information about students' educational experiences during the pandemic and an appropriate comparison strategy. This would help distinguish the possible influence of pandemic-related disruption from other factors.

Conclusion

This longitudinal institutional case study examined student attrition in a three-year B.A. programme at a general degree college in rural West Bengal. Of the 441 Honours and General students admitted in July 2022, only 88 completed the course by June 2025, while 353 were reported to have dropped out. The calculated completion rate was approximately 19.95%, and the dropout rate was approximately 80.05% under conventional rounding.

The semester-wise records show substantial reductions in recorded student numbers, particularly between Semesters I and II and between Semesters V and VI. These findings identify a serious student-retention concern within the institution and provide a basis for further investigation.

The study also demonstrates the importance of distinguishing observed patterns from explanations of those patterns. Although the cohort entered higher education during the post-COVID period, the available data do not establish that the pandemic caused the reported dropout. Similarly, the study cannot determine whether financial hardship, academic difficulties, family responsibilities, or institutional conditions contributed to individual students' decisions to discontinue their studies.

The immediate priorities are to verify the final dropout classification, reconcile semester-wise records with individual student histories, investigate the stages at which the largest reductions occurred, and develop appropriate student-support measures. Systematic tracking, academic mentoring, confidential follow-up, and evidence-based institutional planning may help improve student continuation and completion.

The principal contribution of the study is its documentation of a substantial attrition problem in a specific rural higher education institution. It provides a foundation for more detailed research into the academic, socioeconomic, personal, and institutional factors associated with student dropout. Improving undergraduate completion requires both reliable longitudinal evidence and a sustained commitment to creating educational environments in which students can continue their studies and achieve their academic goals.

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