



Barriers and Institutional Priorities for Sustainable ICT Integration in Post-COVID Higher Education

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) during the COVID-19 pandemic established digital learning as a continuing component of higher education. However, the sustainability of ICT-supported education depends not only on technology adoption but also on students' ability to access, use, and remain engaged with digital learning environments. This study examines student-reported barriers to ICT use and the institutional priorities required for sustainable post-COVID ICT integration in higher education across Kathmandu Valley, Nepal. A descriptive cross-sectional survey was conducted with 54 higher-education students selected randomly across Kathmandu Valley. Primary barriers were difficulty maintaining engagement and motivation (33.3%), limited access to reliable internet or devices (27.8%), lack of technical skills or ICT knowledge (24.1%), and difficulties in assessing learning effectively (11.1%). Reported long-term concerns included student well-being and social interaction (28.8%), inequitable access to technology and resources (27.0%), data privacy and security (23.0%), and the need for continuous adaptation of pedagogical practices (21.2%). For institutional support, respondents prioritized professional development and training (32.1%), ICT infrastructure investment (24.5%), collaboration and knowledge-sharing (20.8%), and technical assistance (18.9%). Digital literacy emerged as the most frequently identified implementation consideration (47.4%). The findings indicate that sustainable ICT integration is a socio-technical challenge requiring coordinated improvements in infrastructure, digital capability, pedagogy, technical support, equity, privacy, and learner well-being. The study provides locally grounded priorities for institutions and policymakers seeking to strengthen resilient and inclusive digital higher education in Nepal.

Keywords: ICT integration, higher education, digital divide, digital literacy, student engagement, post-COVID education, Kathmandu Valley, Nepal

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the use of digital technologies in higher education and normalized practices that had previously been peripheral in many institutions, including videoconferencing, digital course materials, online assessment, shared documents, and virtual academic interaction. In the post-pandemic period, the central challenge is no longer whether ICT can be used for education, but whether institutions can sustain its use in ways that are accessible, pedagogically meaningful, equitable, and resilient. UNESCO's global review of technology in education emphasizes that educational technology is most useful when it is introduced on the basis of appropriateness, equity, scalability, and sustainability rather than technology adoption alone^[10].

This issue is particularly relevant in Nepal, where the pandemic exposed both the potential and the limitations of digitally mediated higher education. Recent Nepal-focused studies continue to report infrastructure constraints, unequal access, digital capability gaps, and the need for institutional support. A 2025 national study of e-learning quality found that students generally recognized the value of online education but that service quality depended on electricity, internet access, devices, institutional

responsiveness, and staff capacity ^[2]. Similarly, a 2024 systematic review of ICT integration in Nepalese higher education identified inadequate infrastructure, high technology costs, unequal access, and limited digital literacy as persistent barriers ^[3].

Evidence from Kathmandu Valley also indicates that effective digital education depends on more than access to an online platform. Studies of graduate and university students in the Valley have linked satisfaction and continued e-learning use to technological conditions, course design, feedback, instructor capability, facilitating conditions, and user familiarity with digital tools ^[5, 7]. At the same time, research on disadvantaged students in Nepal shows that online learning can widen participation for some learners while still reproducing pre-existing inequalities for others ^[4]. These findings suggest that post-COVID ICT integration should be understood as a socio-technical and institutional problem rather than a purely technological one.

The broader survey from which this article is developed examined both the prospects and challenges of ICT use in education. The present analysis focuses specifically on the challenge and implementation dimension in order to identify the obstacles students encounter and the forms of institutional support they consider most important. It therefore asks four questions: (1) What are the main barriers students report when using ICT for education? (2) What challenges may threaten the long-term sustainability of ICT-supported learning? (3) What institutional support do students prioritize? and (4) What implementation considerations should guide future ICT strategies in higher education?

1.1. Contributions

This paper makes four contributions:

- It provides student-level evidence on immediate and long-term barriers to ICT-supported higher education in Kathmandu Valley.
- It distinguishes access and skills barriers from engagement, assessment, well-being, privacy, and pedagogical sustainability concerns.
- It identifies institution-level priorities for training, infrastructure, technical assistance, and collaborative support based on student responses.
- It translates the survey findings into a practical barrier-to-action framework for more resilient and inclusive digital education.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Digital Access, Infrastructure, and the Persistence of the Digital Divide

Digital education depends on reliable connectivity, appropriate devices, electricity, software access, and technical systems. In resource-constrained settings, weaknesses in any of these components can reduce participation even when online learning platforms are available. UNESCO notes that access to devices and connectivity remains uneven and that technology can reinforce educational inequality when the conditions required for meaningful use are not distributed equitably ^[10]. In Nepal, Baral's study of university online learning found that ICT infrastructure and digital skills created clear divisions among learners during the pandemic ^[11].

More recent Nepalese evidence confirms that this problem has not disappeared with the end of emergency remote

teaching. Joshi and Khatiwada's 2024 systematic review identifies inadequate infrastructure, technology costs, access disparities, and limited digital literacy as recurring constraints to ICT integration in higher education ^[3]. In a 2025 study across Nepalese universities, Nepal *et al.* similarly concluded that online education quality is shaped by the availability of electricity, internet service, devices, and institutional support ^[2]. These findings imply that post-COVID sustainability requires institutions to treat connectivity and devices as part of the educational environment rather than as private resources assumed to be available to every student.

2.2. Digital Literacy and Institutional Capacity

Access to technology does not automatically translate into effective educational use. Digital literacy includes the ability to navigate platforms, manage files and communication tools, participate safely in online environments, evaluate information, and use technology purposefully for learning. In Nepalese higher education, earlier research found that policy aspirations for ICT integration were not consistently matched by funding, infrastructure, or professional development ^[12]. Recent studies continue to point to the importance of user competence and institutional enabling conditions. Pokhrel and Acharya's 2024 study of university students in Kathmandu Valley found that facilitating conditions, performance expectations, effort expectations, habits, and social influence shape behavioral intention and e-learning use ^[6].

Instructor capability is equally important. Adhikari *et al.* reported that graduate students in Kathmandu Valley expressed dissatisfaction when teachers and learners lacked familiarity with new information technologies; technological access, instructor quality, course design, and prompt feedback were associated with the perceived effectiveness of virtual education ^[5]. The issue therefore extends beyond one-time platform training. Sustainable implementation requires continuous capacity development for both learners and educators, especially as digital tools, assessment practices, and cybersecurity expectations evolve.

2.3. Engagement, Assessment, and Learner Well-being

One of the most persistent limitations of online and technology-mediated education is the difficulty of sustaining meaningful interaction. Digital access may keep learners connected to a course without guaranteeing concentration, participation, motivation, or social presence. Malla's 2024 study of students in Kathmandu Valley found moderate-to-positive perceptions of online learning but weaker perceptions for practical subjects and faculty-student interaction ^[9]. Likewise, Adhikari *et al.* identified difficulty concentrating as a major challenge in virtual education ^[5].

The longer-term sustainability of digital education also involves learner well-being. Reduced face-to-face interaction, prolonged screen exposure, digital fatigue, and weaker informal peer contact can affect the social dimensions of higher education. Recent Nepalese research on disadvantaged students shows that online learning can improve participation for learners who benefit from studying from home, but the effects are not uniform across socioeconomic and personal circumstances ^[4]. Consequently, resilient digital strategies need to preserve flexibility without assuming that fully online learning is optimal for every student or every learning activity.

2.4. Sustainable Post-COVID Online and Blended Learning

Post-pandemic evidence increasingly supports blended rather than exclusively online models. Curle and Paudel's 2025 study of Nepalese postgraduate students found a strong preference for blended learning, while also showing that technological barriers and limited digital infrastructure remain important constraints ^[1]. Nepal *et al.* similarly recommend blended delivery alongside instructor and support-staff training to improve e-learning quality ^[2]. These findings are consistent with the view that future ICT integration should combine the flexibility of digital learning with the interaction and pedagogical strengths of face-to-face education.

Sustainability further depends on institutionalization. Adhikari and Rana's 2024 analysis of universities' online learning practices in Nepal highlights limited digital access, inadequate ICT understanding, and weak administrative support as challenges that continued beyond the initial emergency period ^[8]. Their findings reinforce the need for stable support mechanisms rather than temporary crisis responses. Technology infrastructure, training, technical help, pedagogical redesign, accessibility, data protection, and monitoring must therefore be coordinated as parts of a single institutional strategy.

2.5. Research Gap

Recent studies in Nepal have examined e-learning quality, digital inequality, behavioral intention, virtual education effectiveness, and sustainability. However, fewer studies organize student-reported barriers and support priorities into a single post-COVID implementation framework focused on Kathmandu Valley. The present study addresses this gap by analyzing four linked dimensions from the same student survey: immediate barriers, long-term sustainability concerns, institutional support needs, and implementation priorities.

3. Methodology

3.1. Study Design and Setting

A descriptive cross-sectional survey design was used to examine student experiences with ICT-supported education. The survey was conducted in 2023 among higher-education students across Kathmandu Valley, Nepal. The design was appropriate because the study sought to describe the prevalence of reported barriers, perceptions of long-term challenges, and preferred institutional responses rather than test a causal intervention.

4. Results and Analysis

4.1. Immediate Barriers to ICT-Supported Education

Table 1: Primary barriers encountered in ICT-supported education (n = 54)

Barrier	Frequency	Percentage
Difficulty maintaining engagement and motivation	18	33.3%
Limited access to reliable internet or devices	15	27.8%
Lack of technical skills or ICT knowledge	13	24.1%
Challenges in assessing learning effectively	6	11.1%
All listed challenges	2	3.7%
Total	54	100.0%

Percentages were recalculated from the reported frequencies using n = 54.

3.2. Sample and Data Collection

The study included 54 students selected randomly from across Kathmandu Valley. A structured questionnaire was used to collect data on participants' experiences with digital learning and ICT use. The questionnaire included closed-ended items on access, technical skills, engagement, assessment, long-term implementation challenges, institutional support, and key considerations for future ICT integration. Participation was voluntary and respondents were informed about the purpose of the study before providing responses.

Some participants left individual questions unanswered. Therefore, valid response counts differ slightly across selected items. The main immediate-barrier question had 54 valid responses, while the institutional-support question had 53 valid responses. Where the thesis table contained percentage inconsistencies, percentages in this article were recalculated directly from the reported frequencies when the frequency total was internally consistent. For items reported only as percentages in the source analysis, the original reported percentages are retained.

3.3. Variables Examined

Four groups of survey variables were analyzed:

- **Immediate barriers:** internet/device access, technical skills, engagement and motivation, and assessment difficulties.
- **Long-term challenges:** well-being and social interaction, inequitable access, data privacy and security, and continuing pedagogical adaptation.
- **Institutional support:** professional development, infrastructure investment, technical assistance, and collaboration or knowledge-sharing.
- **Implementation priorities:** digital literacy, teacher support, infrastructure and technical support, and equity and accessibility.

3.4 Data Analysis

The analysis is descriptive. Frequencies and percentages were used to summarize the survey responses, and the results were organized into tables and figures. No inferential claims are made because the objective is to identify the relative prominence of student-reported challenges and support priorities within the study sample. The interpretation is complemented by recent Nepalese and international literature to contextualize the findings.

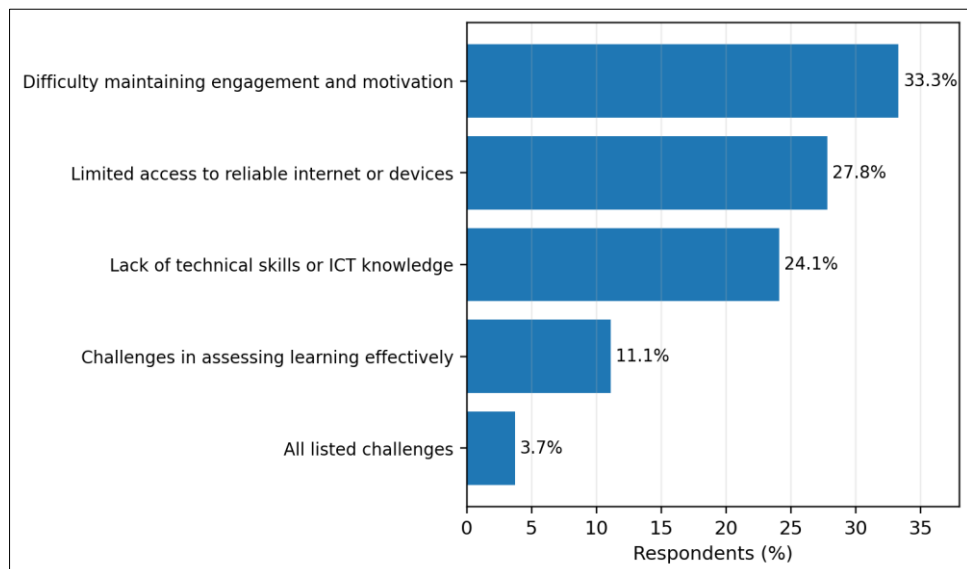


Fig 1: Student-reported immediate barriers to ICT-supported education

The most frequently reported immediate barrier was difficulty maintaining engagement and motivation, selected by 33.3% of respondents. This indicates that the challenge of digital education is not limited to technical access; sustaining attention, participation, and motivation is a central learning problem. Limited access to reliable internet or devices was the second most common barrier (27.8%), followed closely by lack of technical skills or ICT knowledge (24.1%). Assessment-related difficulties were reported by 11.1%,

while 3.7% indicated that they experienced all listed challenges.

Taken together, access and skills account for more than half of the primary barriers identified when considered as separate categories, while engagement is the largest single category. The result therefore points to a dual challenge: institutions must improve the material conditions for digital learning while simultaneously strengthening the pedagogical quality and interactive design of technology-supported courses.

4.2. Long-Term Sustainability Challenges

Table 2: Reported long-term challenges to ICT implementation

Long-term challenge	Reported percentage
Maintaining student well-being and social interaction	28.8%
Inequitable access to technology and resources	27.0%
Ensuring data privacy and security	23.0%
Adapting pedagogical practices to integrate ICT effectively	21.2%

The source analysis reported percentages for this item; exact valid-response frequencies were not reported and are therefore not reconstructed here.

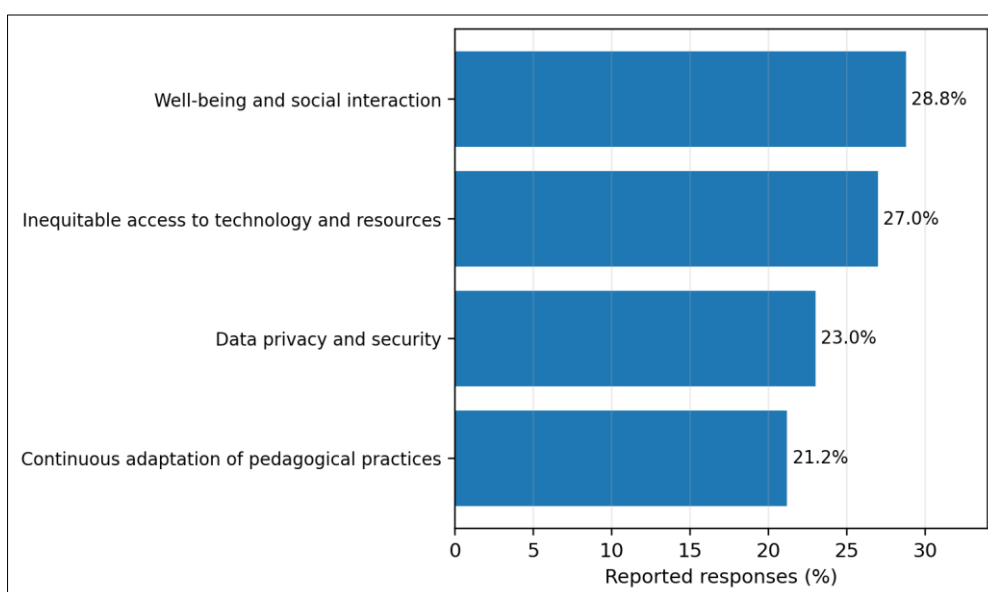


Fig 2: Reported long-term sustainability challenges for ICT integration

The long-term responses broaden the problem beyond connectivity. The largest reported concern was maintaining student well-being and social interaction (28.8%), followed by inequitable access to technology and resources (27.0%). Data privacy and security accounted for 23.0%, while the continuing need to adapt pedagogical practices accounted for 21.2%. The distribution is relatively balanced, suggesting that sustainable ICT integration is constrained by several interdependent issues rather than a single dominant factor.

4.3. Institutional Support Priorities

Table 3: Institutional support preferred by students (valid n = 53)

Institutional support	Frequency	Percentage
Professional development and training opportunities	17	32.1%
Resources for acquiring and maintaining ICT infrastructure	13	24.5%
Collaboration and knowledge-sharing among teachers/students	11	20.8%
Technical assistance and troubleshooting support	10	18.9%
All listed forms of support	2	3.8%
Total valid responses	53	100.1%*

*Rounded percentages sum to 100.1%. One of the 54 participants did not provide a valid response to this item.

Professional development and training was the most frequently selected form of institutional support (32.1%). This was followed by investment in ICT infrastructure (24.5%), collaboration and knowledge-sharing (20.8%), and technical assistance (18.9%). The ordering suggests that respondents did not see infrastructure alone as sufficient. Skills development and ongoing organizational support were at least as important as hardware and connectivity.

The presence of privacy and security as a substantial concern is especially important for post-COVID planning. As learning platforms become routine rather than temporary, institutions hold increasing amounts of personal, academic, assessment, and communication data. This creates a need for clearer governance, safe platform selection, account management, cybersecurity awareness, and transparent data-use practices alongside conventional investments in devices and connectivity.

The relatively high emphasis on collaboration also indicates that digital capability can be strengthened through peer learning and shared practice. Institutions can support this through faculty communities of practice, student digital-support groups, orientation programs, reusable guides, and mechanisms for sharing effective teaching approaches. Such measures can reduce dependence on isolated individual expertise and help normalize ICT competence across the institution.

4.4 Key Considerations for Future ICT Implementation

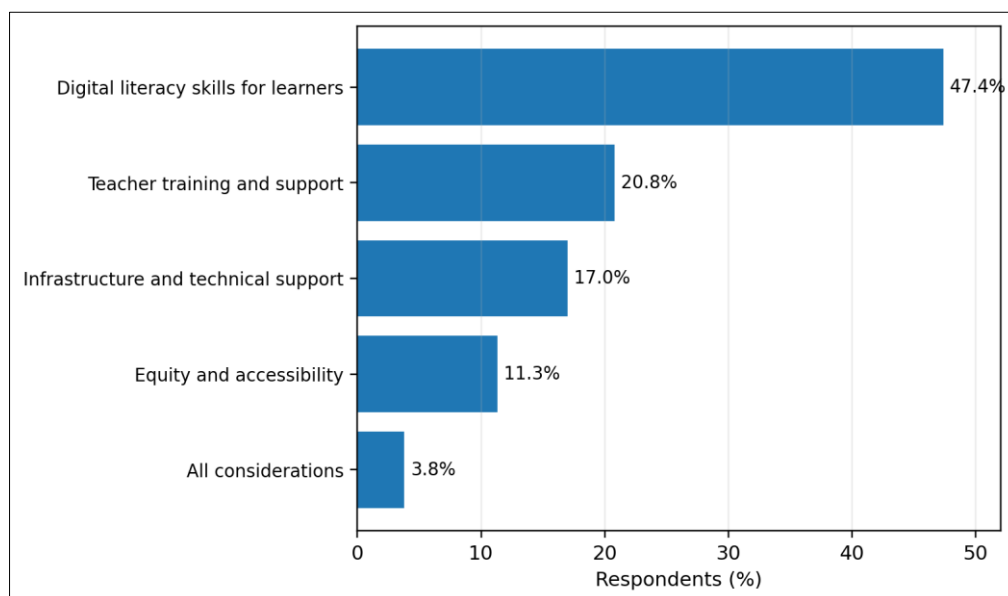


Fig 3: Key considerations for successful post-COVID ICT implementation

Digital literacy was the most prominent future consideration, identified by 47.4% of respondents. Teacher training and support accounted for 20.8%, infrastructure and technical support for 17.0%, and equity and accessibility for 11.3%; 3.8% selected all considerations. The strong emphasis on digital literacy reinforces the distinction between access and effective use. A device and internet connection create the

possibility of participation, but digital competence determines whether learners can use technology productively, safely, and independently.

These findings also imply that future ICT policies should avoid treating implementation as a one-time procurement project. Successful integration requires a continuous cycle of access, capability development, instructional redesign, user

support, and evaluation. Digital literacy should therefore be embedded within academic programs and student orientation, while teaching staff require continuing professional

development that connects technology use to pedagogy rather than focusing only on software operation.

4.5. Barrier-to-Action Synthesis

Table 4: Practical barrier-to-action framework derived from the survey findings

Observed challenge	Institutional implication	Priority response
Low engagement and motivation	Digital access does not guarantee active learning	Interactive course design, structured participation, timely feedback, and blended contact
Unreliable internet/devices	Students cannot participate consistently	Connectivity support, device-access schemes, downloadable/low-bandwidth materials
Limited digital skills	Technology may be available but underused	Recurring digital literacy training for students and educators
Assessment difficulties	Conventional assessment may not transfer effectively online	Diversified assessment, clear rubrics, authentic tasks, and secure assessment procedures
Well-being and reduced social interaction	Fully online delivery may weaken social presence	Blended learning, peer interaction, advising, and student support
Privacy and security concerns	Routine digital learning increases data exposure	Data governance, secure platforms, cybersecurity training, and privacy protocols
Unequal access	ICT can reproduce existing inequalities	Equity-oriented subsidies, accessible design, and flexible participation options

This table is an interpretive synthesis of the survey findings; it is not an additional survey item.

5. Discussion

5.1. Engagement Is the Largest Single Immediate Barrier

The finding that engagement and motivation formed the largest single barrier is consistent with recent Nepalese studies that identify concentration, interaction, and feedback as weaknesses of online education ^[5, 9]. It indicates that improving connectivity alone will not resolve the educational limitations of ICT-supported learning. Courses must be designed to create active participation through discussion, collaborative tasks, frequent feedback, structured activities, and opportunities for direct interaction. This supports the move toward blended learning documented in recent Nepalese research ^[1, 2], where digital flexibility is combined with face-to-face engagement.

5.2. Infrastructure and Digital Skills Remain Foundational

Although engagement was the largest single category, access and technical skills together remain foundational constraints. The survey results align with the 2024 systematic review of ICT barriers in Nepalese higher education, which identified inadequate infrastructure, technology costs, and digital literacy as persistent obstacles ^[3]. They are also consistent with recent Kathmandu Valley studies reporting power interruptions, unstable internet, lack of access to technology, and insufficient familiarity with digital systems ^[5, 7]. These repeated findings across studies suggest that infrastructure and capability should be addressed as continuing institutional responsibilities, not as short-term pandemic responses.

5.3. Sustainability Extends to Well-being, Equity, and Privacy

The long-term challenge responses show that sustainable digital education involves dimensions that emergency remote teaching often overlooked. Well-being and social interaction ranked slightly above inequitable access, while privacy and security were also prominent. This matters because technology use becomes qualitatively different when it moves from temporary emergency use to routine institutional practice. Students may accept short-term inconvenience during a crisis, but long-term digital systems require reliable support, social connection, transparent rules, safe data

practices, and inclusive access.

The equity dimension is particularly important in Nepal. Research on disadvantaged higher-education students indicates that online learning can improve access for some groups, including learners who value the ability to study from home, while other learners continue to face socioeconomic and technological barriers ^[4]. The policy implication is therefore not to frame online learning as inherently inclusive or inherently exclusionary. Its effects depend on design, support, affordability, and the circumstances of individual learners.

5.4. Training Should Be Continuous and Pedagogically Oriented

Training was the most frequently preferred institutional support and digital literacy was the most frequently identified implementation consideration. These findings closely match the literature. Nepal *et al.* recommend instructor and support-staff training alongside blended learning ^[2], while Rana and Rana have long argued that ICT policy requires sustainable professional development and infrastructure to translate into educational practice ^[12]. The implication is that training should move beyond basic platform operation. Educators need support in digital pedagogy, interaction design, assessment, accessibility, privacy, and appropriate use of emerging tools; students need orientation in learning platforms, digital communication, information evaluation, academic integrity, and cybersecurity.

5.5. Implications for Higher-Education Institutions

The combined findings support a layered implementation strategy. The first layer is access: reliable connectivity, device availability, electricity, and low-bandwidth alternatives. The second is capability: digital literacy and professional development. The third is pedagogy: engagement, feedback, assessment, and appropriate blending of digital and face-to-face learning. The fourth is institutional support: troubleshooting, collaboration, monitoring, and clear responsibilities. The fifth is governance: equity, accessibility, data privacy, security, and evaluation. Treating these layers together is more likely to produce sustainable ICT integration than isolated investment in hardware or

software.

For Kathmandu Valley, where connectivity and institutional resources may be stronger than in many rural areas, the persistence of access and skills barriers within this sample is noteworthy. It suggests that digital inequality should not be understood only as a rural problem. Differences in household resources, devices, internet quality, digital confidence, study environments, and institutional support can produce meaningful disparities even within an urbanized region.

5.6. Study Limitations

Several limitations should be considered. First, the sample is small ($n = 54$), so the percentages should be interpreted as descriptive evidence from the surveyed students rather than estimates for all higher-education students in Kathmandu Valley. Second, the study relies on self-reported perceptions and does not independently measure internet quality, device ownership, digital competence, learning outcomes, or institutional ICT capacity. Third, some survey items had missing responses, and the source thesis contained inconsistencies between selected frequencies and percentages. This article therefore recalculates percentages only where the reported frequencies provide a clear valid-response denominator and retains source-reported percentages where exact frequencies were unavailable. Fourth, the cross-sectional design captures student perceptions at one point in time and cannot establish causal relationships. Future studies should use larger multi-institutional samples, validated scales, and inferential or mixed-method designs to examine how access, digital literacy, pedagogy, and support predict learning outcomes and sustained ICT use.

6. Conclusion

This study examined barriers and institutional priorities for sustainable ICT integration in post-COVID higher education using survey evidence from 54 students across Kathmandu Valley. The findings show that the principal challenges are not confined to connectivity. Difficulty maintaining engagement and motivation was the most common immediate barrier, while internet/device access and limited technical skills also remained substantial. Long-term concerns expanded to well-being and social interaction, inequitable access, data privacy and security, and the need for continuing pedagogical adaptation.

Students prioritized professional development, infrastructure investment, collaborative support, and technical assistance, while digital literacy emerged as the most prominent implementation consideration. These results indicate that sustainable ICT integration should be approached as a coordinated socio-technical strategy. Institutions need reliable digital infrastructure, but they also need digitally capable learners and educators, engaging pedagogies, responsive technical support, inclusive access mechanisms, privacy safeguards, and blended learning arrangements that preserve social interaction.

The post-COVID period therefore offers an opportunity to move beyond emergency remote teaching toward a more deliberate model of digital higher education. In Kathmandu Valley and similar contexts, the objective should not be maximum technology use, but appropriate and equitable use that improves learning, resilience, and access while addressing the barriers students continue to experience.

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