

**BRIDGING THE CHASM: STRATEGIC PATHWAYS TO ELEVATE
EDUCATIONAL ACCESS AND STEM THE TIDE OF STUDENT DROPOUT**

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores strategies to reduce dropout rates from the Certificate Level course at the Koggala Regional Hotel School, part of the Sri Lanka Institute of Tourism and Hotel Management. Drawing from the perspectives of course directors, semi-structured interviews were conducted with diverse stakeholders, including former students who left the program, current students, parents, academic and non-academic staff, and experienced hoteliers from various establishments. Key strategies emerged in three primary areas: academic achievement, student integration, and financial support, reflecting the insights and experiences of students and institutional staff alike. Departing students particularly underscored the importance of supportive, close relationships with lecturers, along with individualized counseling and mentoring programs that foster both academic and personal growth. Personalized support programs, such as student loan options, academic assistance, remedial sessions, and supplementary learning opportunities, were identified as vital in alleviating the financial and academic challenges that often lead to student withdrawal. The study further highlighted the role of innovative, interactive teaching methods, alongside technology integration, as essential in engaging students actively and creating a dynamic learning environment. Such approaches not only capture students' interest but also align educational experiences with the evolving demands of the hospitality industry. Overall, the findings emphasize the need for a holistic approach to student retention that integrates academic, financial, and socio-emotional support, fostering a nurturing educational environment. This research advocates for a multi-dimensional strategy that addresses the complexities of student dropout, suggesting that incorporating feedback from course and curriculum developers is crucial in shaping effective institutional policies. The study's outcomes serve as a valuable foundation for future research and policymaking, aimed at enhancing student resilience, boosting success rates, and supporting students on their academic and professional journeys.

Keywords: dropout rates, financial support, student integration, student retention, teaching methods