

# Education Reforms in Nepal: From Ambition to Implementation

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## Summary

*Nepal's new government has moved swiftly to introduce education reforms, including banning bridge courses, removing party-affiliated student organisations from educational institutions and reducing examination pressure. While these measures address genuine public concerns and reflect a clear commitment to reform, this paper argues that their long-term success will depend on how they are implemented. Effective reform requires evidence-based policymaking, stakeholder consultation, legal clarity and carefully managed transitions. For example, restrictions on bridge courses should be accompanied by efforts to address weaknesses in the formal education system that created demand for supplementary coaching. Similarly, efforts to depoliticise campuses should focus on preventing violence, intimidation and disruption while respecting constitutionally protected rights of association. The paper concludes that meaningful and durable reform requires not only strong objectives but also transparent processes, constitutional safeguards and phased implementation.*

## The Promise and the Peril of Reform

Reform in Nepal will require courage but courage is most persuasive when it is accompanied by method. A government demonstrates seriousness not only by moving quickly but by showing that major reforms have been studied, tested, justified and sequenced to withstand implementation. The present administration has brought an energy that many citizens had almost stopped expecting. After years of drift and ritualistic promises, the emergence of a younger political class has created a sense that the state may finally move with purpose. That shift is important and should be acknowledged. It is precisely because the public mood is open to reform, the process now matters. Decisiveness will have greater legitimacy when it is supported by evidence, consultation and a clear legal pathway.

The two decisions examined in this paper – the ban on bridge courses and the removal of party-affiliated student organisations – are not misplaced in their motivations.<sup>1</sup> The frustrations they address are genuine. The concern is that their durability may be weakened if evidence, legal basis and implementation pathways are not made visible before enforcement. The opportunity before Nepal is, therefore, not merely to announce reform but to model how reform can be designed so that decision-makers, courts, students, teachers and families can all understand and trust it. This is why the bridge-course decision provides an important test of reform by procedure.

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<sup>1</sup> Press Release, “Entrance Preparation and Bridge Courses”, Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, Government of Nepal, 30 March 2026, <https://moest.gov.np/content/13577/press-release--2082-12-16/>. The ministry's formal notice directed District Administration Offices to monitor compliance and initiate legal action against institutions continuing to operate after Baisakh 1, 2083 (14 April 2026).

## Bridge Courses: A Symptom of Deeper Educational Weakness

### Background and Policy Decision

Nepal's Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEST) issued a press statement on Chaitra 16, 2082 (30 March 2026) announcing its decision to ban entrance preparation classes and bridge courses for students up to Grade 12, with enforcement to begin from Baisakh 1, 2083 (14 April 2026).<sup>2</sup> The decision formed part of the government's broader 100-Point Governance Reform Agenda, approved at the Cabinet's first meeting under the new administration.<sup>3</sup>

The MEST's formal notice stated that institutions running bridge courses and entrance preparation classes, programmes that typically operate in the gap between the Secondary Education Examination (SEE) and the commencement of Grade 11, or in the period before higher education admissions would no longer be permitted to operate.<sup>4</sup> District Administration Offices were requested to monitor educational institutions and initiate legal action against those continuing to offer such programmes after the deadline.<sup>5</sup>

The MEST's rationale focused on three concerns: that these programmes were generating psychological stress and unhealthy academic competition among students during what should be a period of rest and exploration; that they were undermining equitable access to education by providing advantages to students from wealthier families who could afford private coaching while others could not; and that they were imposing unnecessary financial burdens on families at an already difficult stage of academic transition.

Shortly after the announcement, however, questions arose about the scope of the ban. While the ministry's formal notice appeared to announce a blanket ban across academic levels, the Education Minister, Sasmik Pokharel, issued a public clarification the same evening stating that the ban would apply only to courses up to Grade 12.<sup>6</sup> That clarification left citizens and institutions asking whether preparation courses for medical, engineering and other higher education programmes remained outside the ban. The subsequent removal of the notice from the ministry's website further underscored the need for clearer public communication on scope, legal authority and enforcement.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> "100-Point Governance Reform Agenda", Cabinet Secretariat, Government of Nepal, 28 March 2026, <https://opmcm.gov.np/content/497/government-of-nepal--council-of-ministers-dated/>. Education-sector measures appear principally at points 14–16 and 86–89.

<sup>4</sup> "Govt to Ban Entrance Preparation, Bridge Courses for School Students", *The Himalayan Times*, 30 March 2026, <https://thehimalayantimes.com/nepal/govt-to-ban-entrance-preparation-bridge-courses-for-school-students>.

<sup>5</sup> "Government Bans Entrance Exam Prep Classes and Bridge Courses Starting April 14", *Ratopati*, 30 March 2026, <https://english.ratopati.com/story/56214/>.

<sup>6</sup> "Two Statements, One Policy Mess: Nepal's New Education Minister Faces Backlash over Contradictory Ban on Coaching Classes", *The Statesman*, 31 March 2026, <https://www.thestatesman.com/world/sasmit-pokharel-nepal-education-minister-entrance-bridge-course-coaching-ban-contradiction-criticism-1503575755.html>.

## Demand for Coaching due to the Failure in Formal Education

Before any ban can be assessed on its merits, a prior question must be answered: why does the private coaching economy exist at all? The MEST's notice treats bridge courses and entrance preparation classes as the problem. However, they are more accurately understood as symptoms, market responses to identifiable, well-documented failures in the formal school system. A policy that removes the symptoms without addressing the underlying illness does not cure the patient; it merely conceals the diagnosis.

The first concern is instructional quality. Nepal's government schools have long struggled with inadequate teacher preparation, irregular attendance by both teachers and students in rural areas, insufficient instructional materials and curricula that often exist on paper without being reliably delivered in classrooms. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's Global Monitoring Report and the Asian Development Bank's foundational study on shadow education in Asia both document that private supplementary tutoring expands most rapidly in systems where government schooling is perceived or demonstrated to be insufficient.<sup>7</sup> Nepal fits that description precisely.

The second concern lies in curriculum alignment and assessment design. Nepal's National Curriculum Framework aspires to competency-based learning but classroom practice has lagged significantly behind that aspiration. The Curriculum Development Centre itself has acknowledged in its framework documents that gaps between stated outcomes and actual delivery persist, attributed in part to inadequate teacher training and monitoring.<sup>8</sup> The consequence is a structural mismatch: students arrive at the SEE having been nominally taught about a curriculum that, in practice, they were never adequately taught. Bridge courses step into that vacuum.

The third concern lies in the design of the entrance examinations themselves. Medical and engineering entrance examinations, as well as many Grade 11 stream-selection examinations, test material that lies formally within the school syllabus but is consistently under-taught in government secondary schools.<sup>9</sup> A student who attends a government

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<sup>7</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), *Education for All Global Monitoring Report: Teaching and Learning – Achieving Quality for All* (Paris: UNESCO), 2014, pp. 176-183; <https://www.unesco.org/gem-report/en/publications>; and Mark Bray and Chad Lykins, *Shadow Education: Private Supplementary Tutoring and Its Implications for Policy Makers in Asia* (Manila: Asian Development Bank), 2012, pp. 10-18, <https://www.adb.org/publications/shadow-education-private-supplementary-tutoring-and-its-implications-policy-makers-asia>. Both studies document that private supplementary tutoring expands most rapidly where government schooling is inadequate and Nepal is explicitly referenced in both analyses.

<sup>8</sup> Government of Nepal, *National Curriculum Framework for School Education* (Kathmandu: Curriculum Development Centre), 2019, pp. 1-5, <http://elibrary.moest.gov.np/handle/123456789/259>. The framework acknowledges a gap between its competency-based aspirations and prevailing classroom practice, attributing persistent shortfalls to insufficient teacher training, inadequate instructional materials and weak monitoring systems.

<sup>9</sup> Tribhuvan University, Institute of Medicine, *Annual Entrance Examination Report* (Kathmandu: TU Institute of Medicine), 2023, pp. 4-6, <https://www.updatenp.com/mbbs-entrance-result-2075/>. The report notes that the entrance examination for MBBS programmes tests material that, while formally within the school curriculum, is frequently taught at inadequate depth in government secondary schools, creating structural demand for specialised preparation.

school conscientiously and passes the SEE may still be inadequately prepared for a competitive entrance examination not because she is academically incapable but because the school system did not teach what the entrance system demands. In this context, bridge courses serve not only as a vehicle of privilege for those who can afford them; for many students, they are a corrective instrument filling a gap the state itself created.<sup>10</sup>

This analysis does not constitute a defence of the coaching industry. Private coaching centres are, in many cases, commercially driven, unregulated and inaccessible to the students most in need of support. The equity concern raised by the ministry is real. The question is whether a ban, by itself, solves that equity problem. A stronger approach would reduce the need for coaching by improving instruction, aligning entrance examinations with actual classroom learning and providing public support to students during transition points. Without those accompanying measures, the underlying gap remains even if the visible market is restricted. The students most exposed to that outcome are likely to be those who relied on affordable supplementary instruction to compensate for learning gaps that formal schooling had not yet addressed.

The ministry's announcement, the Education Minister's subsequent clarification and the withdrawal of the notice from the official website together created uncertainty about the scope and enforcement of the ban. That uncertainty matters because reforms affecting students, families and educational institutions require a clear public record from the beginning. The issue is not the absence of reform intent; it is the need for an analytical and administrative foundation that allows reform to be implemented without avoidable confusion.

### **What a Procedurally Sound Approach Would Require**

A procedurally sound approach to reforming this sector would begin with an independent review of the coaching economy: its scale, demographics, costs and educational impact. Such a review should examine whether the proliferation of bridge courses is a consequence of inadequate school-level instruction, and if so, which subjects and grades are most affected; whether entrance examination formats are designed in ways that structurally incentivise coaching and whether reform of those formats might reduce demand for private preparation; what proportion of students relying on bridge courses come from lower-income families and what alternative support mechanisms exist for them if such courses are removed; and what the employment and economic implications are for the considerable number of teachers, tutors and institutions whose livelihoods depend on this sector.

Only after such a review should restrictive measures be considered and any ban should be accompanied by concurrent investment in the school-quality gaps that made the coaching economy possible in the first place. In that sequence, the reform would not merely close a visible market; it would address the educational conditions that allowed the market to grow.

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<sup>10</sup> Institute of Integrated Development Studies (IIDS), *Educational Outcomes in Nepal: A Baseline Assessment* (Kathmandu: IIDS), 2021, pp. 22-27; <https://iids.org.np/>. The study found that a majority of SEE graduates in rural districts reported relying on bridge courses to cover subject matter not adequately taught at the school level, particularly in science, mathematics and English.

## **Student Organisations and the Constitutional Question**

### **Background and Policy Decision**

The second major education-sector decision under the 100-Point Reform Agenda concerns the removal of partisan student organisations from Nepal’s schools and universities under reform point 86.<sup>11</sup> On Chaitra 20, 2082 (3 April 2026), a Coordination Committee meeting convened by the University Grants Commission and led by the Education Minister resolved that student organisations functioning as wings of political parties would be removed from university premises within 60 days. Their offices, banners, flags and physical symbols were to be dismantled immediately.

In their place, the government committed to establishing non-partisan student representative bodies to be called “Student Councils” or “Voice of Students” within 90 days.<sup>12</sup> Thirteen vice-chancellors attended and signed the resolution. The Ministry of Home Affairs was empowered to coordinate security arrangements if challenges arose during the removal process. Subsequently, Prime Minister Balendra Shah reinforced the directive in a meeting with vice-chancellors, stating that no law stood as a barrier to removing political party structures from educational institutions and that the government would provide full security to enforce its decision.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Concern Behind the Proposal**

Nepal’s campuses have long been shaped by partisan politics. Over the decades, political student unions have been associated with a range of disruptive practices, including campus violence and vandalism, strikes and shutdowns that disrupt academic calendars, patronage networks linked to political parties, and instances of extortion and financial coercion. Public frustration with these trends is both widespread and well documented. A significant segment of the public has welcomed the government’s decision, and even student leaders have acknowledged that party-affiliated student organisations have, in recent years, fallen short of their intended role and objectives.

### **The Governing Principle: Regulating Conduct, Not Suppressing Association**

Before turning to the constitutional complications, the governing principle should be stated in action-oriented terms: campus reform should regulate harmful conduct without unnecessarily suppressing lawful association. The issue is not whether partisan student

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<sup>11</sup> “100-Point Governance Reform Agenda”, Government of Nepal, op. cit., Point 86. The relevant provision resolves to remove partisan student organisations from schools and universities and to replace them with non-partisan Student Councils within 90 days.

<sup>12</sup> “Government to Remove Political Student Bodies from Schools and Universities within 60 Days,” Nepal News, 30 March 2026, <https://english.nepalnews.com/s/politics/government-to-remove-political-student-bodies-from-schools-and-universities-within-60-days/>.

<sup>13</sup> “Nepal PM Orders Removal of Political Unions from Campuses,” New Kerala, 20 April 2026, <https://www.newkerala.com/news/a/nepal-prime-minister-instructs-universities-academic-institutions-immediately-967.htm>. Prime Minister Balendra Shah stated at a meeting with vice-chancellors that “no law” stood as a barrier to the removal of party structures and that the government would supply full security for enforcement.

organisations have always behaved well. Many have not. The question is whether the remedy should be directed at the misconduct itself or at the existence of political association as a category.

The state unquestionably possesses the authority and indeed the obligation to address violence, extortion, intimidation and disruption of academic life. These behaviours can be regulated through criminal law, campus discipline, civil injunctions and targeted legislation defining prohibited conduct. A constitutionally careful reform would, therefore, focus on these acts and on the conditions that enable them, while preserving space for peaceful student organisation where it remains lawful.

This distinction is not merely technical. It is the difference between campus order achieved through law and campus order achieved through administrative discretion. If the concern is that certain organisations have engaged in unlawful conduct, those cases should be addressed through established legal and disciplinary mechanisms. If the broader claim is that partisan student bodies, as a category, are incompatible with the educational environment, it requires a transparent legal and constitutional justification, not merely an administrative instruction.

### **The Constitutional and Democratic Complications**

Public dissatisfaction with partisan capture is, therefore, an important context for reform but it does not, by itself, settle on the method of reform. The proposal raises constitutional and democratic questions that should be addressed before enforcement.

Article 17(2)(d) of the Constitution of Nepal guarantees the freedom to form unions and associations, including the freedom to engage in political activities.<sup>14</sup> Student leaders and legal scholars have, therefore, raised the concern that a directive targeting organisations by political affiliation requires careful constitutional justification. The Nepal Student Union and the All-Nepal National Free Students' Union have described the move as unconstitutional, with the chair of the latter warning that ideology cannot be banned through administrative decision.<sup>15</sup>

The procedural question is also significant. The current Free Student Union's tenure, through which political student wings and independent groups compete in campus elections, remains legally valid. Any transition away from that structure would be stronger if it explains how existing mandates will be respected, phased out, or replaced through law. There are also structural concerns about what replaces existing bodies. Fourteen student organisations issued a joint statement arguing that replacing organised political bodies with "cleaner-looking" but weaker student councils may not, by itself, constitute democratic reform; it could be perceived as substituting genuine representative structures with

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<sup>14</sup> Constitution of Nepal (2015), Article 17(2)(d). The full text is available at <https://www.lawcommission.gov.np/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Constitution-of-Nepal.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> "Planned Ban on Student Unions Sparks Debate on Fundamental Right", *Kathmandu Post*, 31 March 2026, <https://kathmandupost.com/politics/2026/03/31/planned-ban-on-student-unions-sparks-debate-on-fundamental-right>. The chair of the All-Nepal National Free Students' Union was quoted as stating that "ideology cannot be banned through an administrative decision".

government-approved bodies more amenable to official management.<sup>16</sup> The reported possibility of deploying security personnel on campuses to enforce removal would also require careful handling because confrontation could undermine the academic environment that the reform seeks to protect.

### **What a Procedurally Sound Approach Would Require**

An action-oriented and constitutionally safer approach to depoliticising Nepal's campuses would distinguish between disruptive practices and political representation. Several measures would strengthen the reform's legitimacy.

Before enforcement, the government should place a formal constitutional opinion or legal memorandum in the public domain explaining why administrative removal of politically affiliated student organisations is consistent with Article 17. The Prime Minister's public claim that no law stands in the way should be treated as an invitation to publish that reasoning, not as a substitute for it. If the government is correct, a transparent legal explanation would strengthen rather than weaken the reform.

Clear legislative standards could define and prohibit specific conduct, including violence, extortion, intimidation, coercive fundraising, obstruction of classes and disruption of academic calendars. Enforcement mechanisms could then be directed at those precise behaviours, while the associative rights of students who organise peacefully remain protected. This would target the conduct, not the category.

The design of non-partisan student councils should be consultative from the outset, involving students, educators, constitutional lawyers, civil society organisations and university administrators. If councils are to replace or supplement existing representative structures, their democratic safeguards should be specified in advance: how representatives will be elected, what powers they will have, how they will be protected from official capture and how accountability will be ensured.

The education ministry's plan to propose amendments to laws governing student representation is, therefore, a necessary step. For legitimacy, however, that legislative process should guide enforcement rather than follow it. The sequence matters: legal framework first, enforcement after. Where rules are clarified in advance, the reform is more likely to be accepted as an institutional correction rather than executive compulsion.

### **From Urgency to Institutional Design**

The larger point is not that the government should slow down for its own sake. It is that Nepal's governance moment requires a distinction between reform as announcement and reform as institutional design. Both can appear decisive in the early stages because both move quickly, promise change and invoke urgency. However, durable reform is grounded in

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<sup>16</sup> "Nepal Government Moves to Ban Partisan Student Unions in Universities", *Ratopati*, 19 April 2026, <https://english.ratopati.com/story/59687/>. Fourteen student organisations signed a joint statement characterising the proposed replacement "Student Councils" as structures more amenable to official management than to genuine student representation.

evidence, consultation, legal sequencing and public reasoning. In a country long frustrated by policy inertia, visible action is politically valuable. Yet visibility becomes more powerful when the quieter work of design matches it.

A similar concern arises with the proposal to scrap internal examinations up to Grade 5 (reform Point 89), another measure in the broader reform package. The impulse is positive: reducing stress, fostering curiosity and moving away from exam-centric learning are all legitimate educational goals. The policy question is how those goals will be implemented. If internal examinations are removed, what form of continuous and qualitative assessment will replace them? Are teachers trained to identify learning gaps early? How will parents be informed? A reform of assessment can be deeply progressive but only if the tools that replace exams are prepared before exams are removed.

That is why the reform intent should be welcomed while the approach is strengthened. Assessment reform, regulation of the coaching economy and restructuring of student representation would all benefit from independent, time-bound and credible bodies with the expertise to examine implementation choices. Such bodies should include teachers, curriculum specialists, child psychologists, school administrators, local government representatives, parents, students and legal scholars.

## **The Value of Consultation**

Transparency is equally central to this approach. Reports should be published, draft recommendations should be opened to public comment and final decisions should be explained in an accessible language. This is not procedural excess; it is the minimum discipline of democratic governance.

Nepal would benefit from institutionalising such practices more systematically, as one of the most persistent weaknesses of public policymaking in South Asia is not a lack of ideas, but a lack of structured consultation before those ideas are translated into policy directives. India offers a partial model in the practice of placing draft proposals in the public domain and inviting comments before finalisation.<sup>17</sup> The value of that approach lies not in delay for its own sake but in the simple recognition that the state is more likely to govern wisely when it is willing to hear objections before, rather than after, implementation.

None of this is an argument for stagnation. Nepal does not need a return to endless delay, nor should consultation become an excuse for inaction. The point is that there is a meaningful space between delay and haste and it is within that space that good governance is made. A confident government should not hesitate to take the time necessary to build intellectual and democratic legitimacy around reforms that will affect millions.

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<sup>17</sup> “Pre-Legislative Consultation Policy”, Ministry of Law and Justice, Government of India, 2014, <https://legislative.gov.in/pre-legislative-consultation-policy>. The policy requires that draft legislation and significant policy proposals be placed in the public domain for a minimum comment period before finalisation.

## The Move Forward

The present administration came to office not merely with the promise of a younger face but with the suggestion that Nepal might finally be governed in a more serious, more responsive and more imaginative manner. That promise can be strengthened if speed is paired with reflection and if moral instinct is translated into careful policy design. A government becomes progressive not simply by speaking the vocabulary of reform but by demonstrating respect for evidence, public reasoning and the principle that citizens affected by major policy change are entitled to explanation before enforcement.

The two decisions examined in this paper are not wrong in their motivations. The impulses behind them are real, the frustrations they address are genuine and the goals they articulate are broadly defensible. Precisely for that reason, they deserve the procedural discipline that converts a defensible impulse into a durable and legitimate reform.

Nepal does need reform, urgently in some sectors. The present administration deserves credit for wanting to act and for placing education at the centre of its reform agenda. The next step is to ensure that reforms are carefully studied, debated openly, legally sequenced and institutionally constructed. The real measure of a serious state is whether it studies before it restructures, consults before it compels and explains before it enforces. That is not hesitation and it is certainly not weakness. It is what democratic maturity looks like and it is the kind of reform Nepal deserves.

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