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FROM LEARNING TO EARNING

What Adolescents and Young People Are Telling Us About
Education, Skills, and Pathways to Opportunities





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INTRODUCTION

Nepal stands at a critical moment in its efforts to harness the potential of its young population. With nearly one-third of the population under the age of 24, the country's future prosperity depends on whether young people can successfully transition from learning to earning. Yet for many adolescents and young people, that pathway remains uncertain.

While access to education has expanded significantly over the past two decades, many young people continue to face challenges in acquiring the knowledge, skills and practical experience needed to secure employment, start businesses, or pursue meaningful livelihoods. At the same time, employers across sectors report difficulty finding workers with the technical and soft skills required in today's labour market.

Across Nepal, this disconnect is becoming increasingly visible. Young people are asking whether education will lead to opportunities. Employers are questioning whether young people are adequately prepared for work. Local governments are seeking ways to create jobs and strengthen local economies. Development partners are exploring how education, skills development and employment initiatives can better respond to changing realities.

Labour markets themselves are also changing rapidly. New opportunities are emerging in digital technologies, entrepreneurship, green industries, tourism, agribusiness and creative sectors. Yet young people continue to face barriers to accessing

these opportunities due to limited access to knowledge and information, guidance, skills development and work-based learning experiences.

To elevate young people's voices and strengthen dialogue on the future of skills and employment, the European Union and UNICEF Nepal convened a series of provincial and national screenings of *Asha: Dreams in Motion*, a documentary featuring the stories of three young Nepalis navigating their own journeys from learning to earning. The screenings brought together approximately 500 participants, with more than half of them being adolescents and young people, alongside government representatives, private sector actors, education stakeholders and development partners. Each screening was followed by dialogues, providing a platform for participants to reflect on young people's aspirations, labour market realities and the actions needed to strengthen pathways from learning to earning.

The discussions revealed a shared concern: Nepal's young people have aspirations, talent and determination, but the systems intended to support them are not always keeping pace with their ambitions or with the realities of a changing labour market.

Drawing from these dialogues, this report presents key insights and recommendations from young people, private sector and government stakeholders.





THE REALITIES OF THE LEARNING TO EARNING GAP

Across the dialogues, young people consistently described a gap between education and opportunity.

Many participants expressed concern that while education remains highly valued, completing school or university no longer guarantees employment. Young people spoke about uncertainty regarding career pathways, limited exposure to practical skills, and difficulties finding decent work opportunities after graduation.

A recurring theme was the perception that education often remains too theoretical and insufficiently connected to real-world labour market demands. Participants described a system that prioritizes academic achievement while providing limited opportunities for practical experience, career guidance and exposure to emerging industries.

As one young participant reflected:

"We study for years, but when we finish, we still don't know what jobs are available or what employers actually need."



Young people also highlighted the lack of information about alternative pathways beyond traditional academic routes. Many noted that technical skills, entrepreneurship and vocational opportunities continue to be viewed as secondary options despite their growing relevance in the labour market.

The discussions also revealed a growing mismatch between aspirations and available opportunities. Young people increasingly expressed interest in digital careers, entrepreneurship, creative industries, technology and innovation. However, many reported limited access to training,

mentorship and practical learning opportunities in these areas.

This challenge was echoed by employers.

Private sector representatives repeatedly noted that vacancies often exist, but employers struggle to find candidates with the required skills and workplace readiness.

"We just opened a soap factory and needed an operator, but we didn't have someone able to do the work, so we had to import labour instead."

– Yadav Prasad Joshi, Private Sector Representative

Participants emphasized that the issue extends beyond technical competencies. Employers frequently cited communication skills, teamwork, professionalism, problem-solving and workplace discipline as major gaps among young job seekers.

Several participants from the private sector observed that while young people may possess certificates and qualifications, many lack the practical experience and transferable skills needed to succeed in professional environments.

At the same time, discussions highlighted significant opportunities across provinces. Participants identified growing demand in sectors such as tourism, hospitality, agribusiness, digital services, information technology, renewable energy, creative industries and entrepreneurship.

The challenge, therefore, is not simply a lack of opportunities. Rather, it is the absence of stronger pathways connecting young people to those opportunities.

As UNICEF Representative to Nepal Ms. Alice Akunga noted during the Kathmandu dialogue:

"Across Nepal, young people are asking very real questions. What journey am I walking? This education, where does it lead me to? Will I get a job? Will I be able to start a business? Will I become an actor? Will I become a doctor? And the bigger one is, will I be able to earn a living?"

The dialogues suggest that addressing the learning-to-earning gap requires more than expanding skills training. It requires strengthening the connections between education systems, labour markets and young people's aspirations.



LINKING SKILLS TO OPPORTUNITIES THROUGH PUBLIC-PRIVATE ALIGNMENT

While participants from both the private sector and the development sector identified significant skills gaps, they also emphasized that solutions already exist within Nepal's public and private sectors. The challenge is bringing these actors together more effectively.

Across the dialogues, private sector representatives consistently described themselves as not only employers but also potential partners in skills development.

Many businesses expressed willingness to contribute to internships, apprenticeships, mentorship programmes, workplace exposure visits and on-the-job training opportunities. Several participants argued that employers should play a more active role in shaping skills development initiatives to ensure training remains relevant to labour market needs.



"Give training and financial aid for skill development for young people. Also prioritize creative skills"

— Jiya Kumari Shah, Student and Mithila Artist

Participants noted that industries are evolving faster than curricula. As a result, stronger mechanisms are needed to ensure education and training providers receive regular feedback from employers regarding emerging skills requirements.

Private sector representatives also identified growing demand for digital competencies, customer service skills, entrepreneurship, problem-solving and adaptability.

At the same time, government representatives emphasized ongoing efforts to strengthen youth employment pathways and support local economic development. However, many acknowledged that public systems alone cannot address the scale of the challenge.

The importance of partnerships was repeatedly pointed out.

Government actors called for closer collaboration with employers to identify priority sectors and skills demands. Private sector representatives stressed the need for structured engagement rather than ad hoc consultations. Development partners highlighted opportunities to support innovation, technical assistance and investments that strengthen the broader learning-to-earning ecosystem.

Several participants also underscored the importance of identifying opportunities unique to different local contexts.

While tourism emerged as a major opportunity in Sudurpaschim, Madhesh and Karnali highlighted agriculture, agro-processing, digital services, green jobs or entrepreneurship. This reinforced the need for localized approaches rather than one-size-fits-all solutions.

The discussions ultimately pointed toward a shared conclusion: skills development initiatives are most effective when government, private sector and development partners jointly design pathways that connect learning directly to employment and entrepreneurship opportunities.



STRENGTHENING LOCAL PLATFORMS FOR SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Throughout the dialogues, participants emphasized that strengthening learning-to-earning pathways requires stronger education systems and local systems capable of reaching young people where they are.

Community Learning Centers (CLCs) emerged as one of the most frequently discussed platforms.

Participants described CLCs as important community-based institutions with the potential to provide flexible learning opportunities for adolescents and young people, particularly those who are out of school, unemployed or unable to access formal education pathways.



"Jobs are being digitalized, so when looking for a job, you should try to have some technical skills no matter the role."

— Rajiv Chaudhary, Manager, Himalayan Bank

However, it was also noted that many CLCs require additional investment, stronger partnerships and more relevant programming to fully realize their potential. Additionally, certification and accreditation of skills training delivered by CLCs, although more relevant and easy to access by adolescents and youth, was identified as a challenge.

Several government representatives described opportunities to transform CLCs into hubs for lifelong learning, skills development, digital literacy, entrepreneurship and career guidance.

Young people emphasized the importance of ensuring that training opportunities offered through CLCs reflect actual local economic opportunities rather than generic training packages.

Participants also pointed to the importance of reaching adolescents and young people who have already left formal education systems.

Many young people who are out of school face multiple barriers to participation, including poverty, geography, social norms and limited awareness of available opportunities. As a result, flexible and community-based approaches were widely viewed as essential.

Development partners were identified as important actors in supporting innovation and systems strengthening. Participants highlighted opportunities to support curriculum development, strengthen alternative learning pathways, build local capacity, expand access to digital learning and generate evidence on effective approaches.

The discussions also reinforced that skills development should not be viewed in isolation from broader education systems strengthening efforts.

Participants repeatedly pointed out the importance of foundational learning, including literacy, numeracy and transferable skills as the building blocks for lifelong learning and employability. Without these foundations, many young people struggle to access further training and employment opportunities later in life.

The dialogues therefore reinforced the need for investments across the entire continuum, from foundational learning and re-engagement opportunities for out-of-school adolescents, to skills development, career guidance and employment support.





YOUNG PEOPLE'S RECOMMENDATIONS

Across the dialogues, participants consistently called for stronger connections between education and employment.

Young people emphasized the need for more practical learning opportunities, internships, apprenticeships and exposure to workplaces while they are still studying. Many argued that work experience should be integrated into learning pathways in Grades 11-12, rather than treated as something that happens after graduation.

Participants also highlighted the need for better career guidance.



Many young people reported making education and career decisions with limited information about labour market trends, emerging sectors or available opportunities within Nepal.

Several participants called for greater investment in digital skills, entrepreneurship and innovation.

Others emphasized the importance of supporting young people to start businesses through mentorship, networking opportunities and access to finance.

Young people also stressed the importance of recognizing diverse pathways to success.

Many argued that skills development, entrepreneurship and vocational pathways should receive the same recognition and support as traditional academic routes.



"I am passionate about digital skills, especially cyber security. I go through online videos to learn it because there are no certified courses in Nepal."

— Deepshikha Chaudhary, Student



"We need transition spaces, meaning internship programmes, training programmes and fellowship programmes. You cannot put young people into the workspace all at once, especially when there is a gap between learning and earning."

— Pavitra Bahadur Gautam, Young Social Entrepreneur and STEM Educator

Participants further highlighted the need to ensure that opportunities reach rural communities, marginalized groups and young people who are out of school.

As one participant noted:

"Talent exists everywhere, but opportunities do not."

Across all dialogues, young people expressed a desire not only for jobs but for meaningful opportunities to contribute to their communities and shape Nepal's future.





CONCLUSION



The dialogues surrounding *Asha: Dreams in Motion* revealed a clear and consistent message: Nepal's young people have aspirations, ambition and potential, but too many continue to face barriers in translating learning into livelihoods.

Participants identified a significant gap between education systems and labour market realities. Young people described uncertainty about career pathways and employment opportunities. Employers highlighted shortages of both technical

and transferable and soft skills. Government representatives emphasized the need for stronger local economic opportunities and more responsive systems.

At the same time, the discussions highlighted significant opportunities. Growing sectors such as tourism, agribusiness, digital services, entrepreneurship, creative industries and green jobs offer new pathways for employment and economic participation. Realizing these opportunities will require stronger alignment between education, skills development and labour market demand, alongside stronger collaboration between government, the private sector and development partners.



"We don't have to start from scratch. There is already a lot of open source material we can implement. We need to update what we teach with new materials."

— Anouk van Neck, Education Focal Point,
European Union Delegation to Nepal





KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The dialogues highlighted several priorities for strengthening learning-to-earning pathways in Nepal:



Strengthen the connection between education systems and labour market needs:

Regular labour market analyses and stronger engagement with employers can help ensure that education, skills development and alternative learning pathways equip adolescents and young people with competencies that are relevant to evolving labour market demands.



Strengthen learning-to-earning pathways throughout the education system:

Practical learning opportunities, including internships, apprenticeships, workplace exposure and mentorship, should be integrated into secondary education and alternative learning programmes to help adolescents gain workplace experience before entering employment.



Invest in foundational, transferable/soft and digital skills from an early age:

Foundational learning remains the basis for lifelong learning and employability. Education systems should also equip learners with digital literacy, financial literacy, communication, problem-solving and entrepreneurship skills to make them more employable and adaptable to changing labour markets.



Expand flexible learning opportunities for out-of-school adolescents and young people:

Alternative learning pathways should be strengthened through Community Learning Centers to provide second-chance education, skills development, certification and career guidance, particularly for those who are out of school.



Increase equitable access to digital learning:

Expanding access to digital infrastructure, learning resources and community-based digital learning spaces can help ensure that adolescents and young people, particularly in rural and remote areas, are able to develop the skills needed for an increasingly digital economy.



Strengthen career guidance and informed transitions:

Career guidance should become a more integral part of education systems, helping adolescents understand labour market opportunities, explore different learning pathways and make informed decisions about education, skills development and employment.



Strengthen partnerships for education systems strengthening:

Government, the private sector and development partners each have complementary roles in improving learning-to-earning pathways. Greater collaboration can strengthen curricula, expand work-based learning opportunities, improve local delivery systems and ensure that education systems remain responsive to evolving economic opportunities.



Support locally responsive education and skills development:

Education and skills programmes should reflect provincial and local economic priorities, enabling adolescents and young people to develop skills linked to opportunities in sectors such as agriculture, tourism, digital services, entrepreneurship and green industries.

No single actor can close the learning-to-earning gap alone.

Government leadership remains essential to strengthening education systems and creating enabling policy environments. The private sector has a critical role to play in shaping skills development efforts, providing internships and apprenticeships, offering mentorship and creating pathways into employment. Development partners can support innovation, evidence generation,

systems strengthening and investments that expand opportunities for adolescents and young people.

The findings from these dialogues point toward a shared agenda: strengthening education systems, expanding alternative learning pathways, fostering public-private collaboration and ensuring that every young person has access to relevant skills, meaningful opportunities and the support needed to achieve their aspirations.

Bridging the gap between learning and earning is not only a youth employment challenge. It is an investment in Nepal's future workforce, economy and development. The voices captured through these dialogues make clear that young people are ready. The task ahead is ensuring that the systems around them are ready too.



"Skills development should be taken alongside education. Young people need industries that match their interests."

— Khadga BK, Chaukune Rural Municipality





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