
Navigating Faculty Development in Higher Education: Experiences of Faculty Members at Nilkantha Multiple Campus

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Abstract

Professional development is a multidimensional and continuous process of growth that bridges the critical gap between theoretical knowledge and classroom implementation. This study explores the current status, institutional policies, and practical strategies of faculty development at Nilkantha Multiple Campus (NMC), a community-based higher education institution in Dhading, Nepal. In the wake of national shifts toward Quality Assurance and Accreditation (QAA), community campuses face unique pressures to enhance faculty competency despite systemic constraints. Rooted in an interpretive phenomenological design and guided by Wallace's Reflective Model and Freire's concept of conscientization, this research investigates how faculty members perceive and navigate their professional journeys. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with four purposively selected full-time faculty members across different departments and analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step thematic framework. The findings reveal that NMC successfully fosters advanced scholarship through research funds, study leave, and peer observation, alongside motivational "Best Faculty" awards. However, heavy teaching loads cause time poverty, and a significant gap remains in utilizing global digital platforms like JSTOR and MOOCs. To sustain innovation, the study implies a critical need for consistent training follow-up mechanisms. Ultimately, the research concludes that further institutionalizing collaborative learning communities and mentoring cycles is essential to maintain global quality standards through collective ownership.

Keywords: faculty development, interpretive phenomenology, collaborative learning, professionalism, reflective practice

Introduction

Teacher Professional Development (TPD) is not a static milestone but the structural backbone of quality higher education. In the contemporary academic landscape, a teacher's initial qualifications represent merely a starting point. To bridge the critical gap between abstract academic theories and complex classroom realities, higher education professionals must engage in a continuous, multidimensional process of personal and professional growth. When faculty development stagnates, classrooms

fall into an uninspiring, repetitive rut, directly compromising student engagement and institutional efficacy. Therefore, creating a robust, ongoing mechanism for instructional competence is an absolute necessity for sustaining academic excellence.

This developmental imperative is particularly stark within the context of Nepal's higher education system, which is currently undergoing a massive national shift toward QAA. While state-funded university departments often receive structured administrative support, community-based campuses face unique, systemic pressures to enhance faculty competency despite severe resource constraints. My motivation to involve myself in this study stems directly from experiencing these grassroots challenges firsthand as an insider within the community campus system. Observing the daily friction between top-down QAA mandates and the practical realities of heavy faculty workloads revealed a critical oversight: institutional policies frequently demand quality benchmarks without understanding how isolated faculty members actually navigate their professional journeys.

While existing global literature heavily explores TPD in well-funded Western universities, there is a distinct research gap regarding how faculty members in Nepalese community higher education institutions perceive, experience, and actively negotiate their professional development. Most local studies focus quantitatively on central university-level training initiatives, leaving the authentic, lived experiences of community campus teachers largely unexamined. This study directly addresses that gap by exploring the current status, institutional policies, and practical coping strategies of faculty development at NMC in Dhading, Nepal.

Purposes of the Study

The primary purpose of this study is to investigate how faculty members at a community-based higher education institution perceive and navigate their professional development journeys amidst shifting national quality mandates. Specifically, the study aims to:

- Examine the current status and existing institutional policies regarding faculty development at NMC.
- Identify the practical, day-to-day strategies deployed by faculty members to foster pedagogical growth.

Research Questions

To achieve these purposes, this study is guided by the following core research questions:

- How do faculty members at NMC perceive the current status and institutional policies of professional development within their campus?
- What practical strategies, reflective practices, and collaborative modalities do faculty members deploy to navigate their ongoing professional growth?

Conceptualizing Teacher Professional Development

Teacher professional development (TPD) in higher education serves as a critical mechanism that transitions faculty members from novices to experts by cultivating the essential skills, knowledge, and collaborative attitudes required to transfer complex theoretical frameworks into impactful classroom practices (Avalos, 2011; Evans, 2008). To fully grasp this transformation, institutions must shift away from traditional, passive transmission models of learning and adopt a dynamic constructivist perspective. Grounded in Freire's seminal notion of conscientization the development of critical consciousness and Bakhtin's concept of ideological becoming, faculty members are expected to continuously update their pedagogical insights to successfully navigate emerging systemic challenges and increasingly diverse student populations. In a genuine, growth-oriented institutional culture, actual teaching performance and localized reflective inquiry are deeply valued over detached, abstract research mandates, effectively making administrative management subordinate to authentic interpersonal academic growth (Komba & Nkumbi, 2008). Recent scholarship reinforces that sustainable TPD cannot rely on isolated, one-off external workshops; instead, it must be deeply embedded within the teacher's daily classroom realities and specific institutional context to generate lasting instructional improvement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Kennedy, 2016).

This comprehensive professional growth is structurally achieved and sustained through a strategic combination of individual, social, and technological modalities. Individually, tools like action research function as intentional, systematic inquiries designed to gain deeper insights into the immediate classroom environment, promoting self-inquiry habits that make teachers highly flexible and self-directed (Miller & Shinas, 2019). This individual reflective practice aligns closely with Wallace's reflective model of TPD, where structured, cyclical reflection on both received and experiential knowledge enables an accurate assessment of personal growth and leads to informed pedagogical decision-making (Farrell, 2020). Socially, this growth expands into cooperative spaces where teachers solve complex professional problems collectively through structured mentoring partnerships (Butcher, 2002) and formalized peer networks (Edge, 1992; Menon, 2004). Recent literature indicates that formalizing these

connections into localized PLCs significantly enhances collective teacher efficacy and institutional ownership over quality assurance (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). Finally, technological and institutional modalities such as subject-specific professional associations like NELTA, alongside ongoing digital shifts like webinars and MOOCs have fundamentally redefined the contemporary academic landscape (Gnawali, 2016). These platforms provide self-directed, asynchronous avenues for lifelong learning that allow decentralized faculty members to transcend geographical limitations and access global standards of scholarship, though a structural digital gap often remains regarding the deep utilization of premium global databases in developing higher education contexts (Burbules et al., 2020; Siemens & Tittenberger, 2009).

National and International Context of Higher Education

Globally, advanced educational systems in countries like Finland, Singapore, Canada, and Australia have institutionalized systematic provisions to recruit and retain highly qualified educators by providing competitive salaries and robust training subsidies (Darling-Hammond, 2017). As Mizell (2010) asserts, quality teaching can only be sustained through highly skilled, continuously supported teachers. In Nepal, the formal inception of teacher training began in 1948 with the Basic Teacher Training Centre (Awasthi, 2003), evolving through the College of Education in 1956, and later the NCED. However, while state planning commissions have aligned macro-level educational improvements with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), national implementation remains deeply unsatisfactory in real classroom settings (NCED, as cited in Pokhrel & Behera, 2016). These top-down, one-size-fits-all approaches consistently fail to address educators' diverse, localized professional needs (Sharma & Phyak, 2017).

This structural policy failure is acutely felt within community-based public campuses. While higher education shapes the nation's future, these community-managed institutions run with severely limited resources, relying heavily on local participation and their own internal initiatives despite receiving nominal support from the University Grants Commission (UGC). Decades of national political instability have left public higher education underfunded. Furthermore, state-sponsored professional development programs have historically targeted the school education sector, effectively excluded higher education faculty members and forced community campuses to look inward for professional renewal.

The Research Gap

While national literature often evaluates large-scale training using quantitative metrics or focuses strictly on QAA compliance, a distinct empirical gap exists regarding higher education faculty development within the unique socio-economic ecosystem of Nepalese community campuses. Consequently, qualitative data capturing the authentic, lived experiences of educators negotiating intense workloads and dual-employment realities remains scarce. At NMC, most faculty face "time poverty," handling heavy morning sessions before working secondary daytime jobs. This secondary commitment drastically limits their capacity for research publication, digital platform engagement, or conference participation. This qualitative study bridges this gap by exploring the lived experiences, systemic barriers, and practical strategies NMC teachers adopt to navigate and strengthen their professionalism.

Methodology

To capture the deep, nuanced realities of higher education teachers, this study adopted a qualitative interpretive approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) grounded in a constructivist perspective (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Qualitative inquiry allows researchers to build knowledge claims based on the lived experiences and meanings that individuals ascribe to their realities (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Within this paradigm, an interpretive phenomenological (Smith et al., 2022; van Manen, 2016) research design was employed to investigate the structures of human experience, ranging from perceptions, thoughts, and emotions to social actions and linguistic expressions. Interpretive phenomenology is uniquely suited for this study as it supports the systematic analysis of personal, professional experiences and practices, enabling an insider exploration of how college lecturers cultivate professional strength within a community campus setting.

The research site was NMC, located in Dhading, Nepal. Participants were selected using purposive sampling in consultation with the campus administration. To ensure data richness and depth, the selection criteria required respondents to be full-time faculty members with at least five years of continuous teaching experience at NMC. A total of four faculty members were selected purposively representing one participant from each academic department.

Data collection relied on in-depth, semi-structured interviews guided by a set of open-ended questions designed to investigate teachers' professional development practices. To establish rapport and ensure the collection of authentic, uninhibited information, the interviews were conducted individually in a friendly environment

within the participants' natural settings. Ethical protocols were strictly maintained; explicit consent was obtained from each participant before recording the interviews, and complete anonymity, confidentiality, and privacy were guaranteed. For clarity in analysis and reporting, the participants were assigned alphanumeric codes: Respondent 1 (R1), Respondent 2 (R2), Respondent 3 (R3), and Respondent 4 (R4).

The collected narrative data were transcribed, organized, and analyzed thematically using Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step phenomenological framework. The process began by thoroughly reading and re-reading the descriptions of the data to get a feel for the whole. Following this initial immersion, significant statements directly about faculty development were extracted. Meanings were then carefully formulated from these significant statements to bridge raw narratives with conceptual understandings. Next, the formulated meanings were clustered to generate main interpretive themes, which were then integrated into a comprehensive, holistic description of the phenomenon. Following this integration, a definitive statement of the findings was generated from the themes, and the final step involved validating the data through extensive comparison and member checking. Through this rigorous process of identifying similarities, differences, and special features, the results were clustered into four distinct interpretive themes.

Results and Discussion

The qualitative data generated from the semi-structured interviews with the four faculty respondents (R1–R4) were analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step thematic framework. I closely read and re-read the transcripts to immerse myself in the data, extracted significant statements regarding institutional mandates, collaborative spaces, structural barriers, and pedagogical practices, and formulated meanings from these expressions. These meanings were then organized into distinct clusters of themes and sub-themes that directly mapped onto the study's research questions. To ensure descriptive validity and interpretative accuracy, a comprehensive summary of the findings was integrated, and member-checking was conducted with the participants to validate that the final themes authentically represented their lived experiences within the campus.

Research and Publication Practices: Mandates vs. Realities

In higher education, teaching and researching are complementary and inseparable responsibilities that a faculty member must perform honestly. At NMC, institutional policy mandates that each faculty member produces at least one research article per academic year. To support this, the campus publishes an institutional journal

of education and research entitled *The Efforts*, which serves as a platform for wide-scale knowledge production. However, the interview data reveals a severe gap between this institutional mandate and the actual research practices of the faculty members.

The majority of respondents demonstrated minimal engagement with research and a profound unfamiliarity with modern academic indexing databases and learning platforms.

I have published only two articles so far but no book publication. I haven't heard about NepJOL, JSTOR, and MOOCs too. I have been told about research especially mini-scale research projects by campus and I'm in the line of indulging myself in research works. (R₁)

This lack of awareness and practice was echoed across multiple departments. Respondent (R₃) remarked that while teaching remains incomplete without continuous research and creative writing, his actual output was confined to a magazine: "I have published a short article in a magazine, not in a research journal. I am unfamiliar with NepJOL, JSTOR, and MOOCs and I need to work on those sectors." Similarly, (R₄) admitted that while the terms had been floated by colleagues, personal application was non-existent: "I have heard about those from my colleagues several times but I am, personally, not clear about those. To be honest, I haven't practised them so far."

In stark contrast, (R₂) represented an exception within the faculty, displaying an active engagement with research writing and digital tools. He noted, "*I prefer developing research works and publications. So far, I have published two research articles including one in peer-reviewed journal. I consult e-library and MOOCs programs in order to advance my subject-related contents and insights*".

Key systemic barriers continue to hinder innovative endeavors even among research-active faculty at NMC, with severe time constraints playing a primary restrictive role. This finding clearly highlights a dual-employment reality where heavy morning teaching loads and secondary daytime employment leave faculty members with "time poverty" drastically limiting their cognitive space for deep scholarship. This aligns with recent findings by Altbach and de Wit (2020), who emphasize that in developing higher education ecosystems, widespread reliance on part-time or multi-venue teaching creates a "taxi-teacher" phenomenon that systematically chokes out institutional research productivity. Furthermore, because academic modeling matters, Brew and Mantai (2021) note that students develop critical research literacy far more effectively when they actively observe their own instructors' scholarly engagement rather than merely consuming static textbooks.

Therefore, I argue that bridging this gap requires moving beyond passive administrative mandates; community campuses must aggressively foster an institutional culture of shared scholarship. The presence of paper mandates or an institutional journal like *The Efforts* is entirely insufficient if the structural conditions such as unmitigated teaching loads force research into becoming a secondary commitment. To transform these constraints into sustained professional growth, departments must establish localized research mentorship circles for novice researchers, cultivate frequent and honest peer-led academic discourse, and implement tangible monetary or workload rewards that position active research as a viable, protected component of a faculty member's professional identity.

Collaborative Spaces: Sharing, Mentoring, and Reflective Practices

Collaborative and reflective practices are vital mechanisms for sustaining long-term professional development. When evaluating engagement with professional associations, the experiences of the faculty members were highly fragmented. Both (R₁) and (R₃) reported no active involvement or affiliation with external professional networks or subject-specific associations. Conversely, (R₄) maintained passive affiliations with two professional bodies, participating strictly as an attendee rather than an organizer. Respondent (R₂) demonstrated the highest level of professional networking, stating: "I take part in conferences almost every year organized by the organizations. I have presented papers as well in national conference that have enriched my academic journey." (R₂) emphasized that presenting in front of seniors and colleagues provides essential exposure that positively reshapes subsequent academic activities.

At the intra-institutional level, formal support mechanisms are noticeably absent. All four respondents uniformly stated that there is absolutely no provision for formal mentoring at either the policy or practice level within the campus. To address this structural lack, half of the respondents stressed the immediate need to appoint senior faculty members with advanced expertise to mediate and support less experienced teachers in refining their pedagogical and professional skills. Such a system would foster a collaborative environment where senior teachers, younger teachers, and those requiring instructional improvement could grow together.

Despite the lack of formal mentoring, informal peer support and localized tools have begun to emerge. Respondent (R₁) noted that regular, informal sharing with departmental colleagues serves as an essential tool for brainstorming and staying

updated. Furthermore, localized reflective practices have yielded highly positive formative results, as shared by (R₁) and (R₄),

"For the last two years, I have been using self-assessment and peer observation forms and that have significantly improved my professional practice." (R₁)

"I have used performance appraisal forms for two years and the reflections have been highly beneficial to shape my further steps academically." (R₄)

These findings indicate that systematic teacher reflection drives vital formative growth even without formal institutional support. This self-directed navigation aligns with Farrell (2022), who notes that autonomous reflective tools successfully counter structural gaps by empowering individual teacher agency. Additionally, the participants' focus on external linkages and specialized bodies mirrors Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018), who state that shifting from informal sharing to structured networks scales up collective teacher efficacy. Therefore, I argue that grassroots peer survival mechanisms cannot replace deliberate institutional architecture; relying entirely on isolated individual efforts leaves faculty development fragmented. To convert these local practices into a sustainable institutional culture, the campus must actively implement structural modifications specifically by establishing a faculty advisory committee and mandating structured faculty exchange programs to build a dynamic learning community.

Institutional Support and Structural Failures

A fundamental complementarity exists between human resource capacity and institutional development; adept faculty members elevate the campus, and in turn, the campus must launch innovative programs to enhance professionalism. However, the narratives of the NMC faculty members reveal significant structural friction, suggesting that the campus administration and individual departments frequently treat professional development as a mere formality.

A major point of criticism was directed at the operational culture of the academic departments. Respondent (R₁) highlighted that the departments have largely devolved into administrative offices limited strictly to course allocation, completely lacking an active academic discourse or stimulating environment. When questioned about the frequency of departmental meetings, (R₁) bluntly stated: "not in a pre-scheduled manner but in the last hour; mainly for the formality."

Furthermore, while the campus administration has offered a few training sessions and workshops over the past five years, their impact has been severely

compromised by deep systemic barriers. Excessive workloads make training highly ineffective because teachers are burdened with extra teaching loads that leave no cognitive space or time to implement new skills. Additionally, there is a total absence of follow-up mechanisms; as (R₃) noted, the campus administration offers few training sessions to the faculty members but the follow-up mechanism to strengthen faculty members' professional capacity remains structurally weak. Without periodic monitoring, initial training investments fail to translate into sustained classroom improvements. Finally, there is a distinct lack of inclusivity in scholarship, with (R₄) adding that even though the campus maintains an institutional journal, it fails to sufficiently incorporate, guide, or incentivize the broader faculty to publish within it.

These findings indicate that treating professional development as an administrative formality marked by superficial departmental meetings, unmitigated workloads, and a total absence of training follow-up severely compromises institutional growth. This friction between paper policies and actual practices aligns with Darling-Hammond et al. (2017), who demonstrate that training investments fail to translate into classroom improvements unless they are paired with continuous monitoring and embedded within active departmental discourse. Furthermore, the participants' call for systematic needs assessments and student evaluations mirrors the findings of Kennedy (2016), who emphasizes that sustainable faculty transformation requires linking institutional accountability with genuine, localized motivation. Therefore, I argue that top-down administrative mandates are entirely ineffective without a structural overhaul of the campus operational culture. To build true human resource capacity, the campus administration must move away from superficial compliance; it must proactively decentralize professional development by transforming departments into active scholarly hubs, prioritizing data-driven student feedback, and introducing tangible monetary and facility incentives to foster genuine faculty ownership.

Pedagogical Adaptation: Perception, Practice, and the ICT Divide

The final theme explores the intersection of pedagogical innovation, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) integration, and the utilization of academic library spaces. The data reveals a sharp digital and methodological divide among the faculty members.

Respondent (R₂) stood out as a highly innovative practitioner who actively utilizes student-centred, contemporary methodologies. He explained his classroom practice as follows:

I am used to using flipped teaching among my students in my class where reading materials-mainly resources, links, and documents are provided to students a few days before I teach. I also have access to an online library. I perceive learning communities as a major medium of learning and I use them as well. I follow academic search engines like Google Scholar to enrich both my content and pedagogy.

Conversely, the remaining three respondents (R₁), (R₃), and (R₄) displayed a total methodological gap regarding modern pedagogical frameworks; they openly admitted that they were entirely unfamiliar with the concept of flipped teaching and had never practiced it in their classrooms.

These findings indicate a critical digital and methodological divide at NMC, where a permissive institutional climate supports individual autonomy but falls short of bridging advanced pedagogical gaps like flipped teaching due to a lack of systematic infrastructure and training. This discrepancy between a supportive environment and actual advanced competency aligns with Burbules et al. (2020), who observe that a digital divide in developing higher education contexts is rarely caused by institutional prohibition, but rather by unequal access to specialized digital resources and systematic technical guidance. Furthermore, the universal adoption of basic ICT devices and informal peer-to-peer learning among all respondents mirrors the arguments of Miller and Shinas (2019), who emphasize that baseline technology integration requires structured institutional scaffolding to mature into meaningful, student-centered digital pedagogy. Therefore, I argue that maintaining a "free environment" is entirely insufficient if faculty members are left to navigate complex technological shifts in isolation. To narrow this internal divide, the campus administration must transition from passive permissiveness to active intervention by designing targeted, mandatory ICT training modules and upgrading the digital infrastructure of library spaces, thereby transforming individual autonomy into collective pedagogical innovation.

Conclusion and Implications

This study concludes that a significant gap exists between NMC's formal professional development policies and the everyday academic practices of its faculty. Passive institutional mandates, "time poverty" driven by dual-employment realities, and absent follow-up mechanisms reduce professional development to an administrative formality, creating sharp research and pedagogical divides. Although autonomous, grassroots peer reflection provides vital formative growth, it cannot substitute for deliberate institutional architecture.

Implications demand shifting from passive compliance to active administrative intervention. The campus must structurally overhaul its operational culture by decentralizing development into active departmental scholarly hubs. This requires establishing formal mentorship circles, implementing structured faculty exchanges, delivering targeted ICT training, and providing tangible workload or monetary rewards to foster genuine faculty ownership.

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