Intellectual Journal of Academic Research
Volume 03, Issue 01, 2025. pp. 105–126
Review Article
DoI: https://doi.org/10.3126/ijar.v3i1.83630

Toward Quality Culture in Nepalese Higher Education: A Systematic Review of QMSS in Affiliated Colleges

Tara Prasad Gautam[1], Anjay Kumar Mishra[2], Shailashri V T[3]

[1]Assistant Campus Chief, Madan Bhandari Memorial College

[2]Dean, Madhesh University

[3]Research Professor, Institute of Management and Commerce, Srinivas University

Abstract

Purpose This study systematically reviews Quality Management Support Systems (QMSS) in Nepalese higher education, focusing on affiliated colleges under public universities. It examines existing quality assurance (QA) frameworks, identifies challenges, compares Nepal's QA practices with India, Malaysia, and Bangladesh, and explores factors shaping a quality culture. Methods Following PRISMA guidelines, a systematic review was conducted using academic databases and official policy documents up to 2025. Sources addressing QA in Nepalese affiliated colleges were selected. Data were thematically analyzed, resulting in five themes: QA readiness, accreditation, internal QA, stakeholder involvement, and the policy–practice gap. Findings Nepal has formal QA and accreditation systems, but implementation is inconsistent. Affiliated colleges face unclear policies, limited resources, and fragmented governance. Accreditation is often viewed as compliance rather than continuous improvement. Internal Quality Assurance Cells exist but are underused, and stakeholder participation is low. Comparison suggests Nepal could benefit from India's structured accreditation, Malaysia's national QA integration, and Bangladesh's focus on internal QA. Conclusions Nepal's affiliated colleges need clearer QA mandates, capacity building, stronger stakeholder engagement, and incentive-linked accreditation. Shifting from compliance to continuous improvement is key to developing a quality culture.

Keywords: quality assurance, higher education, affiliated colleges, Nepal, quality culture

Article Info

Corresponding Author

Tara Prasad Gautam, PhD

Email

tara2jun@gmail.com

Article History

Received: 2025, June 12
Accepted: 2025, July 28
Published: 2025, August 29

Cite

Gautam, T. P., Mishra, A. K., Shailashri, V. T. (2025). Toward quality culture in Nepalese higher education: A systematic review of QMSS in affiliated colleges. *Intellectual Journal of Academic Research* (*IJAR*), *3*(1), 105–126. https://doi.org/10.3126/ijar.v3i1.83630

Introduction

Higher education in Nepal has expanded dramatically over the past few decades, raising pressing questions about quality and relevance. The University Grants Commission (UGC) reports that Tribhuvan University (TU) – the nation's oldest and largest public university alone has over 1,000 affiliated colleges enrolling more than 335,000 students. Rapid growth in enrollment and institutions has amplified concerns that the expansion may have come at the expense of educational quality. Policymakers have long

recognized the need for robust quality assurance (QA) mechanisms. For example, Nepal's Quality Assurance and Accreditation (QAA) initiative was formally launched in 2007 under the Second Higher Education Project, with guidelines developed in the early 2010s to address issues of employability and accountability (UGC, 2013). These efforts led to new QA structures – such as the Education Quality Assurance and Accreditation Council (EQAAC) under the UGC – and established processes like accreditation, audit committees, and quality standards intended to regulate and improve higher education institutions (HEIs). Nepal's higher education sector has grown rapidly in recent decades, driven by liberalization policies, increased access, and rising demand for skilled human resources. However, the expansion has not been matched by improvements in quality assurance, governance, and institutional accountability. To address these gaps, the University Grants Commission (UGC) introduced the Quality Assurance and Accreditation (QAA) framework in 2007. Despite these initiatives, as of 2024, less than 3% of Nepal's colleges and universities had achieved full accreditation, signaling persistent challenges in ensuring a consistent quality culture across institutions (Gautam & Shailashri, 2025).

Within this context, Quality Management Support Systems (QMSS) have emerged as a critical mechanism for fostering institutional quality, particularly among affiliated colleges, which form the backbone of Nepal's higher education landscape. Gautam and Shailashri (2025) highlight that effective QMSS require integration of core components of quality education such as robust academic standards, efficient governance, outcome-based curricula, and continuous stakeholder engagement. Without these, colleges risk focusing more on symbolic compliance rather than achieving genuine, sustainable improvements.

Affiliated colleges face unique challenges, including resource constraints, dependence on parent universities, and limited autonomy in academic and administrative decision-making. As Gautam (2025) notes, many institutions struggle to implement structured knowledge management practices, weakening their capacity to support research, innovation, and evidence-based quality enhancement. Moreover, gaps in digital transformation and inadequate collaboration between stakeholders further slow progress toward establishing an effective quality culture (Gautam, Mishra & Shailashri, 2025).

Another pressing concern is the migration of skilled graduates due to limited job opportunities and perceived gaps in quality education in Nepal. Gautam and Adhikari (2025) observe that poor institutional quality and weak employability pathways remain major drivers of the country's growing brain drain, underscoring the urgency of strengthening QMSS to enhance competitiveness and retain talent. Additionally, integrating student feedback systems has been identified as a powerful driver for improving teaching effectiveness, aligning curricula with market needs, and enhancing institutional performance (Gautam & Mishra, 2025).

Against this backdrop, this systematic review examines the implementation of QMSS in Nepalese affiliated colleges, exploring their effectiveness, limitations, and contributions to building a sustainable quality culture in higher education. By synthesizing findings from recent empirical and policy studies, this review identifies critical insights for policymakers, institutional leaders, and educators to strengthen Nepal's higher education ecosystem.

Despite reforms, Nepal continues to struggle with effectively implementing quality assurance (QA) across its extensive network of affiliated colleges. A persistent policy–practice gap endures, with recurring issues such as weak governance, political interference, inadequate resources, and fragmented coordination among regulatory bodies (Bhandari et al., 2025; Ghimire & Timilsina, 2022). A comprehensive review of Nepal's higher education system highlights fundamental challenges "over-rapid expansion of enrollment, under financing of the system, low managerial effectiveness, irrational structure, and quality

erosion" which further exacerbate QA deficiencies (Bhandari et al., 2025). Many affiliated colleges lack internal quality assurance mechanisms and depend almost exclusively on episodic external inspections or accreditation exercises; as a result, QA often devolves into a superficial "box-checking" activity rather than functioning as a driver of continuous improvement (Ghimire & Timilsina, 2022).

Furthermore, Gautam et al. (2025) report that as of 2024, only 3% of Nepal's colleges and universities were fully accredited, underscoring the symbolic nature of much accreditation and the lack of alignment with performance indicators or outcome-oriented education. The authors argue that transitioning from performative accreditation to more participatory, progressive QA systems is crucial for enhancing institutional credibility, improving graduate employability, and elevating Nepal's higher education sector in national development (Gautam et al., 2025). This backdrop underscores the urgent need to conduct a systematic assessment of the current Quality Management Support Systems (QMSS) in affiliated colleges, and to explore the factors that might foster a genuine culture of quality.

Quality assurance (QA) in Nepal's higher education has increasingly turned toward practical, evidence-based strategies that can bridge the persistent gap between policy and practice. Among the scholars contributing to this conversation, has offered particularly valuable insights through a series of empirical studies focused on community and affiliated colleges. His work underscores the importance of embedding both student participation and technological innovation into the fabric of QA processes.

One strand of Gautam etal (2025) highlights the transformative potential of systematic student feedback. By institutionalizing feedback loops such as incorporating student representatives into QA committees and using feedback results to shape faculty development colleges can move beyond compliance-driven accreditation to foster a genuine culture of teaching excellence and accountability .Complementing this, Gautam, Mishra, and V. T. (2025) examine how digital transformation, when paired with human–AI collaboration, can strengthen sustainability initiatives in higher education. They argue that Internal Quality Assurance Cells (IQACs) should integrate AI-readiness and sustainability metrics directly into accreditation frameworks, enabling institutions to advance both educational quality and environmental goals.

Together, these studies offer a blueprint for QA reform in Nepal: a model where student voice and socio-technical innovation are not peripheral considerations but central drivers of institutional improvement. Such an approach reframes QA from a bureaucratic requirement into a strategic tool for building globally competitive, future-ready colleges and universities.

While various individual studies have examined aspects of higher education quality in Nepal, there has been no comprehensive synthesis focusing on affiliated colleges and their QA systems. Affiliated campuses constitute the majority of tertiary institutions and enrollments in Nepal, yet they operate under unique constraints – balancing between their parent universities' regulations and their own limited autonomy. The existing literature highlights problems (e.g. weak oversight, resource scarcity) but often in isolation. There is a need to consolidate findings and identify overarching themes regarding how these colleges manage (or struggle with) quality assurance. Moreover, drawing comparisons with neighboring countries can help contextualize Nepal's progress and gaps. This study fills that gap by systematically reviewing research on QA practices, challenges, and cultural factors in Nepal's affiliated colleges, thereby providing a holistic picture of QMSS in this context.

Affiliated colleges form the backbone of Nepal's higher education system, yet their ability to ensure and sustain educational quality remains a critical concern. Despite reforms such as the Quality Assurance and Accreditation (QAA) system under the University Grants Commission (UGC), many of

these institutions struggle with weak governance, political interference, inadequate resources, and limited internal quality mechanisms. Existing research addresses these challenges in isolation, leaving a gap in understanding how Quality Management Support Systems (QMSS) function within their unique structural and operational constraints.

Research Objective

This study aims to systematically review the literature to evaluate the current QA framework, identify barriers to effective implementation, compare Nepal's practices with those of other countries, and examine factors shaping a genuine quality culture. The goal is to provide an integrated perspective and recommend strategies to strengthen QA systems and promote sustainable quality culture in Nepalese higher education..

Literature Review

QA in Affiliated Colleges: Context and Challenges

Most of Nepal's higher education is delivered through affiliated colleges tied to public universities. In the South Asian model, large public universities (like TU) oversee hundreds of smaller private or community colleges through an affiliation system. This model rapidly expanded access to higher education across Nepal, India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, but often with limited investment in quality controls. Lee (2011) found that affiliated colleges in South Asia generally provide "sub-standard education" due to factors such as low funding, multiple layers of authority, complex governance, and inadequate facilities. In Nepal, similar critiques have been raised: many affiliated colleges operate with scarce resources and lax oversight, undermining educational quality (Lee, 2011; Ghimire & Timilsina, 2022).

A defining feature of affiliated colleges is their lack of academic autonomy. The affiliating university prescribes curricula, examination systems, faculty qualifications, and admission criteria, leaving the colleges with minimal decision-making power over academic matters. This centralized control, while meant to ensure standardization, often acts as a double-edged sword. On one hand, it imposes uniform standards; on the other, it can stifle local initiative and accountability. Weak affiliation criteria and monitoring have been identified as major barriers to improvement. For instance, a recent survey at Tribhuvan University found that stricter affiliation requirements (e.g. regarding faculty credentials or facilities) were perceived to have the least influence on quality, suggesting current criteria are too lenient or poorly enforced (Ghimire & Timilsina, 2022). Indeed, Ghimire and Timilsina (2022) report that TU's existing affiliation standards are "weak" in promoting quality improvement, as evidenced by affiliated campuses meeting only minimal benchmarks rather than striving for excellence.

Khadka, Acharya, and Bhandari (n.d.) discuss the current status, challenges, and policy issues related to quality assurance and accreditation in Nepal's higher education system. The rapid proliferation of colleges has strained the capacity of universities and regulators to supervise them. With TU alone affiliating over 1,060 colleges, oversight is inevitably stretched thin. Quality Assurance agencies and university QA cells struggle to provide regular mentorship or audits. The consequences, as noted by Lee (2011), include large variations in quality and many small colleges with limited facilities or qualified teachers. Without effective oversight, some colleges may focus more on student intake (tuition revenue) than on maintaining academic standards, leading to a risk of "quality erosion" in higher education.

Governance and Autonomy Barriers

Governance structure in Nepal's higher education system significantly affects quality assurance outcomes. Affiliated colleges are governed by a multi-tier system: central government and UGC policies set broad requirements, universities enforce affiliation rules and curricula, and colleges themselves handle day-to-day operations. This can create bureaucracy and ambiguity. In practice, colleges are answerable to multiple authorities – a situation ripe for delays and gaps in accountability. Faculty surveys in Nepal

frequently cite political influence, administrative inflexibility, and bureaucracy as obstacles to meaningful QA (Paudel, Yadav, GC, Gurung, Sapkota, & Baral, 2020; Ghimire & Timilsina, 2022). For example, politically appointed management or frequent leadership changes can derail long-term quality initiatives. Administrative processes often prioritize paperwork (e.g. filling out accreditation forms) over genuine improvements in teaching and learning outcomes.

A study by Ghimire and Timilsina (2022) highlighted the fragmented nature of QA at Tribhuvan University: there was no single unified QA system covering all faculties; instead, quality efforts were largely driven by external accreditation visits or isolated departmental initiatives. Similarly, an implementation study of QA policy in Nepali colleges observed that "higher education institutions may not work together… resulting in a fragmented system", as each unit tended to operate in silos without sector-wide coordination. This policy–practice gap means that although QA committees and guidelines exist on paper, they are not fully embedded in institutional practice. Dhakal and Agrawal (2022) note that unclear government policies and low institutional authority at the college level make it difficult to sustain QA programs. In essence, colleges often lack the autonomy or incentive to take proactive quality measures beyond what is mandated.

Another governance challenge is the hierarchical decision-making that slows down innovation. Proposals for curricular reform or new pedagogical approaches in an affiliated college can be bogged down in approvals at the university or ministry levels. By the time changes are authorized, they may be obsolete or academic staff may be demotivated. This rigidity discourages local academic leaders from pursuing quality enhancement projects. In contrast, truly autonomous institutions (like some private universities or constituent campuses) can more quickly adopt improvements such as revising syllabi, introducing faculty development programs, or upgrading labs. The affiliated colleges, lacking such freedom, often default to compliance mode doing the minimum required to satisfy their parent university and accreditation bodies.

Theoretical Lenses: TQM, Stakeholder Theory, and Conceptions of Quality

To frame the quality challenges in Nepal's colleges, it is useful to consider some theoretical perspectives. Total Quality Management (TQM), originally a management approach from industry, has been applied to education as a way to instill continuous improvement and a culture of quality. Key TQM principles include customer focus (in education, the "customers" are students and employers), continuous improvement of processes, and broad employee involvement in identifying and solving quality problems. In theory, if Nepali colleges embraced TQM fully, we would expect to see data-driven decision making (using student performance indicators, feedback surveys, etc.), regular training for faculty and staff, and empowered quality circles at all levels. In practice, however, uptake of TQM in Nepal's higher education has been uneven. Many institutions have established Internal Quality Assurance Cells (IQACs) as suggested by QA guidelines, which is a step consistent with TQM ideas. But as the literature indicates, these IQACs often focus on preparing reports for accreditation rather than spearheading ongoing quality improvements in teaching methods or administrative services. The culture of continuous improvement – where every staff member actively seeks ways to enhance quality – is still nascent in most colleges.

Stakeholder theory in the context of education posits that all parties with a stake in the institution (students, faculty, administrators, employers, parents, community) should have input into defining and assuring quality. According to Sapkota (2025), a "quality culture" grows when stakeholders feel ownership and responsibility. The Nepali literature suggests that such inclusive engagement is largely missing so far. One survey of colleges concluded that "active participation from students and stakeholders is essential for developing quality culture", yet in reality most colleges lack formal mechanisms for stakeholder

input Students are typically not involved in quality committees or curriculum councils; feedback from employers about graduates' skills is rarely collected systematically. Instead, quality is seen as the domain of the principal or a small QA unit, which limits the perspectives considered. Inclusive engagement is crucial for cultivating a quality culture, yet most Nepali colleges still lack formal mechanisms for stakeholder input (Bista, 2025). Stakeholder theory would encourage Nepali colleges to set up channels like student satisfaction surveys, alumni advisory boards, or regular faculty-management meetings to discuss quality issues. Engaging stakeholders not only provides diverse viewpoints on what "quality" means, but also builds a shared commitment to improvement.

Harvey and Green's (1993) classic conceptions of quality in higher education provide another useful framework. They describe quality as a relative concept with multiple meanings: exceptional (high standards), perfection/ consistency, fitness for purpose, value for money, and transformative (producing positive change in learners). In Nepal's higher education policy discourse, quality often seems to be treated in the "fitness for purpose" and "value for money" sense – i.e., does an institution meet the minimum standards and produce graduates who can get jobs (meeting the purpose and justifying the investment)? Accreditation criteria and funding incentives reflect this compliance-oriented view. However, the higher ideal of quality as transformative, which would focus on how education changes students' capabilities and contributes to society, receives less attention. Harvey and Green would argue that a true quality culture moves beyond checklist compliance to embrace continuous enhancement and transformation. For Nepal, this implies a need to shift mindsets: rather than viewing quality assurance as just satisfying external inspectors, colleges should internalize it as striving for excellence and meaningful student learning outcomes at all times.

In summary, these theoretical lenses suggest that Nepal's affiliated colleges will need a combination of structural changes and cultural shifts to improve quality. TQM emphasizes internal processes and empowerment; stakeholder theory emphasizes inclusion and shared responsibility; and Harvey & Green's framework reminds that quality is multidimensional – not just about meeting set standards, but about broader educational impact. These ideas will be revisited when interpreting the findings of the review.

Comparative QA Models: Insights from India, Malaysia, and Bangladesh

To better understand Nepal's QA journey, it is instructive to compare it with experiences of neighboring countries that have grappled with similar issues of expanding higher education and ensuring quality.

India

India hosts one of the world's largest systems of affiliated colleges with over 112,600 colleges under more than 274 universities posing significant challenges for ensuring educational quality (Stella, 2003; Garg, n.d.; Jaffer, Ng'ambi, & Czerniewicz, 2009.). In response to these concerns, the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) was established in 1994 as an autonomous body under the University Grants Commission to assess and accredit higher-education institutions ((Amutha & Vijayaselvi, n.d.; Stella, 2003).

The NAAC accreditation process for affiliated colleges involves a structured self-study culminating in a Self-Study Report (SSR), followed by a campus visit from a peer evaluation team, leading to a grade or rating (Stella, 2003; Jaffer, Ng'ambi, & Czerniewicz, 2009.). Accreditation is cyclical: institutions submit Annual Quality Assurance Reports (AQARs) through their Internal Quality Assurance Cells (IQACs) and undergo re-accreditation every five years (Stella, 2003; NAAC, n.d.). NAAC also emphasizes stakeholder feedback such as student input which is integrated into the self-study and peer evaluation process (Stella, 2003; NAAC, n.d.).

Although the average quality remains uneven across such a vast system, NAAC's framework has encouraged many institutions to establish

IQACs and pursue continuous improvement based on feedback from previous accreditation cycles (Stella, 2003; NAAC, n.d.). Nepal could learn from this model by adopting clear accreditation criteria, implementing regular monitoring, and linking recognition or funding to accreditation status as a way to incentivize quality enhancement.

Malaysia

Malaysia presents a distinct scenario with a more compact and cohesive higher education system shaped by a strong national vision for quality assurance. The Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA), established under the Malaysian Qualifications Agency Act 2007, ensures that all higher education providers public or private are vetted and accredited under the Malaysian Qualifications Framework (MQF), enforcing consistent standards across credentials and programs ((Ismail & Wahab, 2013)). Beyond mere compliance, Malaysia has embedded quality enhancement into its push to become an international education hub; MQA's mandate includes positioning Malaysia globally by upholding rigorous benchmarks and championing continual improvement((Elmelhy, Yusuf, Alawi, & Hussein, 2023)). Scholars like Crosling (2017) emphasize Malaysia's dual emphasis on accountability and innovation: while the government establishes broad quality standards, institutions are encouraged to cultivate distinct strengths to compete internationally (Crosling, 2017; Mahbub, 2017). Accreditation procedures are not merely regulatory checkpoints but are used by universities as strategic opportunities treating peer reviews as developmental feedback sessions that drive ongoing enhancements (Crosling, 2017). For Nepal, the takeaway is compelling: integrating QA into national goals such as economic development and global competitiveness can transform quality assurance from bureaucratic obligation to a platform for innovation and institutional growth.

Bangladesh

Bangladesh's higher education QA system is more recent, but it mirrors many elements of the South Asian context. Bangladesh set up a national Quality Assurance Unit in the 2010s and, similar to Nepal, encouraged universities to establish Internal Quality Assurance Cells (IQACs) under a World Bank-supported project. Rahnuma (2020) explains that Bangladesh developed a comprehensive Quality Assurance Framework that includes internal self-assessment at the department/program level and external accreditation at the institutional and program levels. An important insight from Bangladesh is the emphasis that robust internal QA is indispensable to hasten external accreditation. In other words, the country recognized that without effective internal review processes, colleges and universities would struggle to meet the standards required for accreditation. Thus, a lot of effort has gone into training IQAC teams, conducting pilot self-assessments, and only then moving to formal accreditation of programs. Bangladesh has also made accreditation quasi-mandatory: while not all programs are accredited yet, there is clear pressure that accreditation will become a requirement for operating or for receiving government funds. As a result, even institutions that haven't been accredited are working on self-assessment and quality improvement, knowing that an external audit is on the horizon. For Nepal, the Bangladesh model underscores the value of capacity building at the institutional level. Building a quality culture internally (through workshops, quality committees, and process improvements) is seen as a prerequisite for succeeding in external QA evaluations.

In summary, the comparative perspective reveals several common threads and differences. All three countries – India, Malaysia, Bangladesh – illustrate the need for clear standards and a formal accreditation process to drive quality. They also show that internal QA structures (like IQACs) are crucial. Where they differ is in the extent to which QA is seen as a developmental tool versus a compliance checkbox. Malaysia's experience especially highlights aligning QA with broader goals and encouraging innovation, which can be an aspirational model for Nepal as it aims to enhance its higher education competitiveness. Table 1 provides a brief summary of these comparative insights alongside Nepal's status.

Table 1

QA Systems in Nepal and Selected Countries (India, Malaysia, Bangladesh)

Country	QA System Highlights	Applicability to Nepal
Nepal	QAA system launched 2007 (UGC/EQAAC); voluntary accreditation (as of 2020, ~113 HEIs accredited); Internal QA Cells (IQACs) being formed but varying effectiveness; heavy reliance on external evaluation.	Needs to strengthen internal QA, enforce accreditation more broadly, and close policy–practice gaps.
India	NAAC accreditation mandatory for colleges (5-year cycle); Self-Study Report (SSR) and Peer Team visits; grading influences funding and autonomy; 90% of students in affiliated colleges, quality still varies, but structured QA processes in place.	Structured accreditation can motivate compliance; use grading/incentives to push colleges toward continuous improvement (e.g. NAAC model for affiliate colleges).
Malaysia	MQA oversees accreditation under a national Qualifications Framework; QA linked to goal of an international education hub; strong government support for quality enhancement; encourages innovation within standards (balance compliance and creativity) (Crosling, 2017).	Align QA with national vision (e.g. skilled workforce development); provide incentives for quality excellence, not just minimum standards; publicize ratings to encourage competition.
Bangladesh	QA Framework established ~2015; requires internal self-assessment (IQAC at universities) and external accreditation; government and donor support for capacity building; internal QA seen as "indispensable to hasten…programme accreditation"; accreditation becoming expected norm.	Emphasize building QA capacity inside institutions (train IQACs, run self-assessments) as groundwork for accreditation; set timelines for mandatory accreditation of colleges to push laggards while supporting them through the process.

Note. Lee (2011); Crosling (2017); Rahnuma (2020); NAAC/UGC guidelines; Mishra & Jha, 2023

This comparative overview suggests that Nepal can learn from and adapt elements of these models. Particularly, making QA a more mandatory and routine part of higher education (as in India and Bangladesh) and tying it to strategic objectives (as in Malaysia) could help Nepalese affiliated colleges move from a culture of compliance to a culture of continuous quality improvement.

Methodology

This study employed a systematic literature review methodology to collect and synthesize existing knowledge on Quality Management Support Systems (QMSS) and quality culture in Nepalese higher education, with a focus on affiliated colleges. The review was conducted following established guidelines for systematic reviews in social sciences (e.g., PRISMA flowchart for study selection and transparent reporting of search strategy and inclusion criteria).

Search Strategy

We searched multiple academic databases and repositories for relevant literature published up to 2025. Key sources included Google Scholar, ERIC, Scopus, Web of Science, and NepJOL (Nepal Journals Online), among others. The search terms combined keywords such as "Nepal", "higher education", "quality assurance", "affiliated colleges", "internal quality assurance", "quality culture", and related terms. We also searched specifically for known organizations and policies

(e.g., "UGC Nepal quality assurance", "EQAAC accreditation Nepal") to find official reports or policy documents. In addition, backward and forward citation tracking was performed: we examined references of key articles for additional sources, and used Google Scholar's citation function to find newer works that cited seminal papers (like Lee, 2011 or Harvey & Green, 1993) in the Nepali context.

Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

We included sources that met the following criteria: (a) focus on higher education quality assurance or quality management in Nepal (especially affiliated college context or general HE context if insights were transferable), (b) empirical studies (quantitative or qualitative), conceptual papers, or official reports that provided analytical discussion on QA, and (c) published in English (for accessibility) in peer-reviewed journals, conference proceedings, or by reputable organizations (e.g., UGC, Ministry of Education). Given the limited academic literature specifically on Nepali affiliated colleges, we also included comparative studies from other South Asian countries when they discussed affiliated college QA models, to enrich our analysis for RQ3. We excluded sources that dealt solely with school education or technical/vocational education, as well as commentary pieces without evidence or analysis (e.g., brief news articles or editorials lacking substantive content).

Screening and Quality Appraisal

In total, our search yielded an initial pool of about 50 sources. After reading titles and abstracts, we narrowed this down to approximately 20 sources that directly addressed our research questions. These were obtained in full text and further screened. Each source was evaluated for quality and relevance. For research studies, we used basic Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklists (e.g., checking clarity of aims, appropriateness of methodology, validity of conclusions). Policy documents and official reports were appraised based on their comprehensiveness and the credibility of the issuing body. We rated the overall strength of evidence using a qualitative approach inspired by the GRADE framework – considering factors like consistency of findings across studies and limitations or biases in the data. Overall, the evidence base included survey-based research at Nepalese colleges and universities, case studies, as well as syntheses from policy documents; while much of it is cross-sectional (snapshot of perceptions) and qualitative, the triangulation of multiple sources strengthens confidence in the identified themes.

Data Extraction and Synthesis

We systematically extracted pertinent information from each source using a coding framework. Key details noted included: the context (e.g., Tribhuvan University affiliated colleges, or national QA policy), methodology (e.g., survey of faculty, document analysis), and main findings related to QA practices, challenges, or cultural factors. We also extracted direct quotes or notable terms used by authors (for example, phrases like "quality erosion", "box-checking", "continuous improvement") that could illustrate the themes. These data were organized using NVivo qualitative analysis software to facilitate coding. Through iterative reading and coding, we identified recurring themes and patterns in the literature. Five major themes emerged (described in the Results section) that were consistently mentioned across multiple sources. The thematic synthesis involved grouping pieces of evidence under these themes and interpreting how they answer our research questions.

Throughout the analysis, we maintained a reflexive stance. Two reviewers independently coded a subset of sources and then compared their coding; discrepancies were discussed and resolved to refine the thematic structure. This collaborative approach helped ensure that the themes are not biased by a single researcher's perspective. We also cross-checked whether each research question was adequately covered by the data. RQ1 (QA framework) and RQ2 (challenges) were directly addressed by most Nepali studies, RQ3 (comparative) was covered by including regional literature, and RQ4 (quality culture) was addressed

by drawing interpretive insights from multiple themes and some specific sources focusing on culture. By the end of the synthesis, we had a coherent set of themes that encapsulate the state of quality management in Nepal's affiliated colleges.

The next section presents the Results of this synthesis, organized by the five main themes. For clarity, we provide supporting evidence and examples under each theme. Following that, in the Discussion, we interpret these findings in light of the theoretical frameworks and international comparisons outlined earlier, and then propose recommendations.

Results and Discussion

The literature review revealed five major themes regarding Quality Management Support Systems (QMSS) and quality culture in Nepal's affiliated colleges:

- Theme 1: QA System Readiness – the institutional capacity and policy environment for quality assurance.
- Theme 2: Accreditation as External Validation – the role of formal accreditation processes and how they are perceived.
- Theme 3: Internal Quality Assurance Mechanisms – the development and effectiveness of internal QA measures (such as IQACs) within colleges.
- Theme 4: Stakeholder Involvement – the extent of engagement of faculty, students, and external stakeholders in QA and quality improvement.
- Theme 5: Policy–Practice Gap – disconnects between QA policies/guidelines and actual on-the-ground implementation in colleges.

Each theme is described below with supporting evidence from the reviewed sources. Table 2 provides a summary of the themes, example findings, and illustrative sources.

Theme 1 : QA System Readiness

A consistent finding is that many Nepali colleges and universities are not fully "QA-ready," meaning they lack some of the fundamental conditions to implement effective quality assurance. Several issues fall under this theme:

Unclear or Insufficient Policy Guidance

Although Nepal has issued various QA guidelines and strategic plans, these policies have not always been clearly communicated or understood at the institutional level. Dhakal and Agrawal (2022) observe that there is a "lack of clear policies and regulations from the government" regarding quality assurance, leaving colleges uncertain about what exactly they should do to assure quality beyond pursuing accreditation. For instance, colleges know they should form an IQAC or submit progress reports, but there is ambiguity in how to conduct continuous quality improvement internally. The National Education Policy 2019 and the Higher Education Policy outline some quality directives, but many colleges remain unaware or unclear about these details. This lack of clarity can lead to a check-the-box approach rather than an informed strategy.

Resource Constraints and Training Gaps

Almost every source highlighted resource limitations as a core problem. Simply put, quality initiatives require resources – qualified staff, training, data systems, funding for improvements – and these are often scarce. Ghimire and Timilsina (2022) note that Nepalese universities "lack trained staff to implement quality assurance and accreditation programmes". Many affiliated colleges do not have personnel with expertise in QA or data analysis. Faculty and administrators may not be trained in self-assessment techniques or modern pedagogical quality standards. Financial constraints are also severe: government funding per student is low, and colleges (especially community campuses) operate on tight budgets that barely cover salaries, leaving little for quality enhancement activities (like library upgrades, faculty development workshops, or new

technology). As a result, even if there is a will to improve quality, the capacity to do so is limited. One telling statistic from an official report: by 2019/20, out of roughly 1,436 HEIs in Nepal, only 373 had even enrolled in the QAA process (initial steps), and far fewer had completed it. Many colleges likely find the process daunting due to lack of funds and expertise to meet the standards.

Slow Uptake of Accreditation

Although Nepal's QAA system has been in place since 2007, the pace of accreditation has been slower than hoped. Assurance, Secretariat, Pandey, & Subedi (2023) report that as of 2020, around 100+ institutions had achieved accreditation, leading the government to revise targets downwards. Initially under a World Bank project, the target was to accredit 125 institutions by 2020, but this was scaled back to 113, acknowledging the slow progress. The literature suggests a few reasons for this slow uptake: accreditation in Nepal has been voluntary (not legally mandated), so some colleges, especially private ones, do not see immediate benefit; the process is lengthy (averaging over 5 years from application to accreditation); and colleges fear the outcome (a poor evaluation could harm reputation). Thus, only the more proactive or resourceful institutions entered the system early, while many others adopted a "wait-and-see" approach, resulting in a gradual pace.

Fragmentation and Lack of Coordination

Another aspect of readiness is how well the higher education sector coordinates QA efforts. Dhakal & Agrawal note that Nepali higher education institutions historically "may not work together for the success of the national education system," which has led to siloed efforts rather than collective improvement. For example, if one college develops a good practice (say a robust faculty appraisal system or an e-learning platform that improves outcomes), there is no strong mechanism to share that practice across other colleges. The UGC hosts occasional QA workshops and peer learning events, but these are limited. The result is that each college is somewhat isolated in its QA journey, and the overall system readiness remains patchy.

In summary, Theme 1 highlights that without clearer policies, better training and funding, and more collaboration, the foundation for quality assurance remains shaky. Colleges often struggle to translate QA policies into practical actions. Building this readiness is a prerequisite to any successful quality reforms.

Theme 2: Accreditation as External Validation

For many affiliated colleges in Nepal, "quality assurance" is synonymous with going through the accreditation process administered by UGC/EQAAC. The review found that accreditation is often viewed primarily as an external validation or certification, rather than part of an internal continuous improvement cycle.

Interviews and surveys confirm that a large number of colleges undertake quality-related efforts only when preparing for an accreditation review. In one study at Tribhuvan University, over half of respondents essentially equated the university's QA efforts with the accreditation system ((University Grants Commission [UGC] Nepal, n.d.)). This reliance on external audits has both positive and negative implications:

On the positive side, accreditation provides a structured goal for colleges. It sets a concrete target (meeting certain standards and getting accredited), which can mobilize action. Some dormant improvements (like updating curricular documents, renovating facilities, documenting policies) get done because the accreditation requires it. Accreditation, thus, has served as a catalyst in a number of colleges to start thinking about quality. The UGC's Strategic Plan (2021–2030) explicitly linked accreditation status to funding and incentives – accredited campuses are eligible for additional grants, which certainly motivated several institutions to participate. Moreover, obtaining accreditation brings prestige and public recognition, which private colleges in particular can use for marketing to students.

However, the literature also warns of drawbacks in an "accreditation-first" mindset. Ghimire and Timilsina (2022) observed that while faculty generally agreed QA is beneficial, many saw it as a one-time event – something to "get through" to receive a certificate – rather than a continuous journey. When QA is reduced to an audit, colleges may engage in short-term fixes or cosmetic changes to impress peer reviewers, instead of addressing deeper issues. For example, a college might quickly formulate some policies or conduct a one-off teacher training just to show evidence for accreditation, but then neglect follow-through once the visit is over. This behavior is sometimes referred to as "window dressing". One faculty member quipped that for some management, "quality assurance means preparing a nice file for the assessors." This indicates a risk that accreditation becomes a bureaucratic checkbox rather than leading to substantive improvement in classroom teaching or student learning.

Another issue is that accreditation in Nepal has so far been optional (though strongly encouraged by UGC). Thus, some institutions – especially those who doubt they would do well – simply opt not to participate. Dhakal & Agrawal (2022) noted that awareness of the QA/accreditation program is low in some quarters, and that without external pressure, certain colleges "deprioritize or underfund" QA activities. In other words, if leadership doesn't value the accreditation, they might not allocate any budget for it (such as for conducting a self-study, hiring QA staff, etc.). This creates a self-reinforcing cycle where the colleges that most need improvement are the least likely to seek accreditation or invest in quality (because it's voluntary and they fear a negative outcome).

In sum, accreditation has undoubtedly been the centerpiece of Nepal's QA efforts in affiliated colleges – it serves as an important external validation mechanism to ensure basic standards. Yet, the literature suggests that accreditation alone cannot sustain quality; it needs to be complemented by internal motivation and continuous improvement. The next stage for Nepal will be shifting perceptions so that accreditation is seen not as the end goal but as one step in an ongoing quality journey.

Theme 3: Internal Quality Assurance Mechanisms

A positive trend in recent years is the establishment of Internal Quality Assurance Cells (IQACs) or similar bodies within universities and larger colleges. These units are intended to institutionalize quality monitoring and enhancement from within. The review finds that while IQACs have been set up in many institutions (often as a prerequisite for accreditation), their effectiveness varies widely.

In principle, an IQAC is responsible for tasks like developing quality guidelines, conducting internal audits of academic departments, gathering feedback from students and teachers, and preparing Annual Quality Assurance Reports. Several sources mention that IQACs exist on paper but are not fully functional in many colleges. For example, at Tribhuvan University, each faculty or campus might have named an IQAC coordinator, but often this role is assigned to someone as an extra duty without training or resources. Ghimire & Timilsina (2022) found that quality efforts were often limited to one or two individuals (the QA focal persons) rather than a broad-based committee – indicating that IQACs were not performing as active multi-member committees in practice.

However, there are cases of more progressive campuses where internal QA is being taken seriously. One case study (Acharya & Shrestha, 2025) of a leading affiliated college reported that the college's IQAC regularly collected student feedback each semester and held review meetings with faculty to discuss the findings. They also introduced a peer observation system where teachers observe each other's classes for developmental feedback. These practices align with TQM principles and show that with committed leadership, an IQAC can be a driver of change. Another example: some colleges have started using data-driven approaches – e.g., analyzing pass rates, dropout rates, or exam results across years to identify problem areas in courses. Dhakal & Agrawal (2022) describe nascent

"monitoring and evaluation" practices where data was used to pinpoint departments with declining performance so that interventions could be made (such as curriculum revision or tutoring programs).

Despite these examples, the predominant picture is that internal QA systems are still maturing. Many IQACs focus on documentation rather than action. A common complaint is that after an IQAC compiles the Self-Study Report for accreditation, there is little momentum to implement the improvements identified in the self-study. Part of the issue is authority: IQACs often lack clout within the institutional hierarchy – they may make recommendations, but college management may or may not act on them, especially if resources are needed. There is also the challenge of engagement: getting faculty to buy into internal assessments can be hard if they perceive it as extra work or implied criticism of their teaching. In some colleges, IQAC meetings are rare or attendance is low, indicating apathy or lack of incentives.

In conclusion, establishing internal QA mechanisms is a step in the right direction, but Nepal's affiliated colleges need to empower and professionalize these units. The literature suggests providing proper training for IQAC members, allocating a modest budget for QA activities, and linking the IQAC's work to institutional decision-making (so that their recommendations lead to action). Only then can internal QA become truly effective and not just a formality.

Theme 4: Stakeholder Involvement in Quality Processes

The degree to which various stakeholders are involved in QA and quality improvement emerged as a significant theme. Stakeholders include internal ones (students, faculty, administrative staff) and external ones (alumni, employers, community representatives, even parents in some cases of community campuses). The consensus in the literature is that stakeholder involvement is limited and informal in Nepali higher education QA so far.

Starting with students – who are arguably the primary beneficiaries of quality education – their voice is minimally heard in quality matters. Acharya & Shrestha (2025) found that colleges where students had avenues to provide input (such as through student satisfaction surveys or representation in committees) tended to report a stronger quality culture. Students can offer valuable insights on issues like teacher effectiveness, curriculum relevance, and campus facilities. Yet, most affiliated colleges do not conduct regular student evaluations of courses or teachers. There is also no tradition of student representation in governance (unlike some Western universities that have student unions participating in academic council meetings). In some instances, colleges have ad-hoc student forums or suggestion boxes, but these are not institutionalized. The lack of formal mechanisms means student feedback often gets lost unless expressed through informal means (or through complaints, which may not be systematically addressed).

Faculty involvement is also critical. Faculty are the ones delivering education, so their engagement in QA is essential. Encouragingly, surveys (e.g., Ghimire & Timilsina, 2022: Mishra, 2022) indicate that faculty agree in principle that QA practices (like self-assessment or peer review) can improve performance. However, the actual involvement of faculty in QA tends to be limited to compliance tasks. For example, faculty may be asked to prepare course files or documentation for accreditation, but not necessarily involved in higher-level discussions of how to improve teaching quality or revise programs. Ghimire & Timilsina noted that faculties played a "prominent role" in assuring quality only informally – often individual teachers maintain standards in their own classrooms out of personal commitment, rather than because of an institutional quality system. There are few incentives or rewards (such as teaching excellence awards or career advancement linked to quality contributions) that would actively encourage faculty to dedicate time to QA initiatives.

External stakeholders (like employers and industry) are the least engaged according to the literature. This is a notable gap because employers can provide feedback on whether graduates have the skills needed in the job market, which is a key dimension of quality (relevance). In countries like India, some colleges have Industry Advisory Boards for their programs – such practices are rare in Nepal's affiliated colleges. There have been some efforts under projects like the World Bank's Higher Education Reforms to involve employers in curriculum design for certain professional subjects, but on the whole, external stakeholder input is ad-hoc. Alumni could be another resource for quality improvement (for example, alumni surveys about how well their education prepared them for careers), but very few colleges systematically collect alumni feedback.

The net effect of this low stakeholder engagement is a closed-loop system where quality is managed (or not managed) by a small group of administrators, with little input from those most affected. The literature argues that to foster a true quality culture, this has to change. Quality should be "everyone's responsibility." That means, for instance, creating opportunities for open dialogue: town-hall meetings where students can talk to faculty and management about issues; committees that include student or community representatives when making decisions about campus improvements; involving faculty across all departments in setting quality objectives for the year, etc. Until stakeholders feel they have a voice, it is hard to get their buy-in to QA initiatives. As one study put it, raising awareness and commitment through participation is key – people support what they help create.

Theme 5: Policy–Practice Gap

The final theme ties together many of the above issues: it is the gap observed between what is mandated or envisioned in policies and what actually happens in practice at the ground level. Nepal has not been short on educational policies and plans. Over the last decade, several pertinent documents have been released: the National Education Policy 2019 explicitly calls for improving quality and even mentions moving towards outcomes-based education; the Higher Education Strategic Plan and the EQAAC Strategic Plan (2021–2030) lay out numerous quality targets and activities; the UGC requires annual reporting on quality from accredited institutions, etc. However, multiple authors note that these policies often remain on paper without full implementation.

A few reasons for this policy–practice disconnect emerge in the literature:

Weak Enforcement Mechanisms

Many QA policies in Nepal are guidelines or incentives rather than strict regulations. For example, accreditation is encouraged but not compulsory (as of 2025). The UGC can recommend that colleges form IQACs or submit reports, but it has limited means to penalize non-compliance beyond withholding certain grants. If a college chooses not to pursue accreditation or to ignore an IQAC, there is little immediate consequence. This lack of enforcement means some institutions only do the minimum required to keep operating. In contrast, if accreditation were mandatory for affiliation renewal, or if funding was tightly linked to quality metrics, colleges would have stronger motivation to implement policies.

Prioritization and Ownership

Quality assurance might be espoused in mission statements, but it competes with other pressing issues for attention. College leaders often have to focus on immediate survival needs – student admissions, infrastructure maintenance, dealing with politics – and QA can fall to the wayside if it's seen as a luxury or secondary concern. Dhakal & Agrawal (2022) emphasize that without leadership commitment, QA programs end up under-funded and under-prioritized. Many colleges have strategic plans that mention quality, but day-to-day decisions (like budgeting) may not reflect those priorities. It requires a shift in mindset to treat quality as integral to the institution's core operations rather than an add-on.

Cultural Resistance or Inertia

Implementing QA often means introducing new practices (evaluation, transparency, accountability) that can challenge existing culture. Faculty who are used to academic freedom might resist standardization or peer review of their teaching. Administrators might be hesitant to expose problems for fear of blame. As noted earlier, some institutions resist changes needed for quality assurance "for cultural or political reasons" (Paudel, Yadav, GC, Gurung, Sapkota, & Baral, 2020). This could include reluctance to remove underperforming staff due to political patronage, or to enforce attendance and assessment rules strictly. Thus, even when a policy says "do X", the institutional culture might quietly resist X if it threatens entrenched interests or comfort zones.

Knowledge and Skill Gaps

Sometimes policies are not implemented simply because people don't know how. A college may want to conduct a self-assessment as policy dictates, but if no one on staff has experience with writing a self-assessment report or analyzing data, the process might be done poorly or not at all. Similarly, outcome-based education (OBE) is encouraged by policy now, but many faculty have never been trained in designing curricula around learning outcomes or in modern assessment techniques. This skills gap means policies are not translated into concrete practice in classrooms.

All these factors contribute to a visible gap: Nepal has the "right" QA provisions in many respects, but the challenge lies in actual execution. Bridging this gap is crucial for the future. The literature implies that beyond crafting policies, authorities need to invest in capacity building, provide resources, and possibly introduce stronger accountability measures to ensure policies lead to action.

Table 2

Summary of Key Themes, Issues, and Illustrative Evidence from Literature

Theme	Key Issues/Observations	Illustrative Evidence (Source)
1. QA System Readiness	Unclear policy directives for colleges– Insufficient resources and training for QA– Slow adoption of accreditation– Fragmented, siloed efforts among HEIs	"Lack of clear policies and regulations from the government" leaves colleges unsure how to proceed (Biswakarma & Dhakal, 2022).Universities lack trained staff to implement QA and accreditation (Ghimire & Timilsina, 2022).Only ~8% of HEIs accredited by 2020; target of 125 reduced to 113 due to slow progress (UGC/EQAAC, 2021)."Institutions may not work together… leading to a fragmented QA landscape" (Biswakarma & Dhakal, 2022).
2. Accreditation as External Validation	Accreditation seen as main QA mechanism– Tendency to treat it as one-time certification– Compliance-driven mindset, risk of superficial changes– Voluntary nature leading some to opt-out or delay	Over 50% of respondents at TU identified QA with just the accreditation system (survey in Ghimire & Timilsina, 2022)."51% of faculty saw accreditation as their QA mode…the process itself was the focus rather than continuous improvement" (Ghimire & Timilsina, 2022, paraphrased).UGC Strategic Plan links accreditation status to funding incentives (Assurance, Secretariat, Pandey, & Subedi, 2023). Some colleges "deprioritized and underfunded" QA if leadership interest was low (Dhakal & Agrawal, 2022).

Theme	Key Issues/Observations	Illustrative Evidence (Source)
3. Internal QA Mechanisms (IQAC) Mechanisms (IQAC)	– Most institutions have formed IQACs or similar bodies– Effectiveness is mixed: often limited to documentation– Few data-driven improvements except in some proactive colleges– IQACs lack authority/resources in many cases	Colleges "use Internal Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC), stakeholder feedback, policy review, and continuous improvement" nominally (stakeholder interview, UGC 2020 report).IQAC often focuses on preparing reports for accreditation, with little follow-up action (multiple sources).Some colleges introduced student feedback surveys and peer review under IQAC guidance, leading to curriculum tweaks (Acharya & Shrestha, 2025).Need to "ensure IQACs have training on data collection and continuous improvement" (Recommendation echoed by Dhakal & Agrawal, 2022).
4. Stakeholder Involvement	– Limited formal involvement of students, faculty, employers in QA– Student feedback mechanisms rare (only ad hoc)– Faculty input often informal; no structured incentives– External stakeholder (industry/ alumni) engagement nascent	"Active participation from students and stakeholders is essential for developing quality culture", yet such participation is largely nominal (Acharya & Shrestha, 2025: Mishra & Nepal,2023).Nearly all surveyed faculty agree QA improves performance, but lack formal channels to contribute (Ghimire & Timilsina, 2022).Few colleges have industry advisory boards or alumni surveys; quality decisions made internally by admin (multiple case reports).Quality culture studies stress need for open dialogue and shared responsibility among management, staff, and students (Acharya & Shrestha, 2025).
5. Policy–Practice Gap	– Strong QA policies and frameworks exist (national level)– Implementation on ground is lagging– Causes: weak enforcement, low prioritization, resistance to change, capacity issues– Results in a disconnect: compliance on paper vs. actual practice	National Education Policy 2019 and Strategic Plan 2030 lay out QA goals, but many institutions slow to implement changes (MoEST, 2019; UGC, 2021)."Formal QA rules exist but are poorly implemented" (Observation by Ghimire & Timilsina, 2022).Many accredited colleges still struggle to sustain improvements post-review (UGC QAAD monitoring reports).Needed: enabling environment (training, incentives, leadership) to close policy–practice loop (Dhakal & Agrawal, 2022).

The above table synthesizes the core findings in a compact form. Having outlined the evidence on each theme, we now move to interpret these results more holistically. The Discussion section will relate these themes back to our theoretical framework and research questions, comparing Nepal's situation to international practices and drawing out implications for policy and institutional action.

Discussion

The findings of this systematic review depict Nepal's affiliated colleges as a system in transition towards better quality management, but still grappling with foundational challenges. In this section, we interpret the results through the lenses of TQM and stakeholder theory, reflect on how Nepal's scenario compares with the international

examples, and discuss what these mean for developing a quality culture. We also revisit the conceptual models of quality (as per Harvey & Green, and Garvin) to analyze the underlying approach to quality in Nepal's higher education.

TQM Perspective

Total Quality Management emphasizes continuous improvement and the involvement of all members of an organization in quality processes. If we map Nepal's QA journey against classic TQM elements, several gaps become evident (as highlighted in Theme 1 and 3). Firstly, leadership commitment is a cornerstone of TQM. Some Nepali institutions have leaders who champion quality – for instance, a proactive campus chief who drives accreditation and internal reforms. But system-wide, this commitment is uneven. Many college leaders appear more focused on expansion or daily administration than on quality enhancement. Without strong leadership advocacy, QA remains peripheral.

Secondly, employee involvement in continuous improvement is limited. TQM would envision faculty regularly meeting to review learning outcomes, administrative staff brainstorming how to streamline services for students, etc. Our review found that such bottom-up quality initiatives are rare; quality is largely externally driven. The current QA approach in Nepalese colleges is still quite top-down – the UGC or university sets the agenda (accreditation, compliance requirements) and the college tries to follow. For a true TQM culture, colleges would need to empower internal QA teams and give faculty and departments ownership of improvement plans. Some positive signs include the formation of IQACs and the introduction of feedback mechanisms, but these need scaling up. In TQM terms, Nepal's higher ed is at an early maturity stage where quality is not yet "built into" every process, but rather checked occasionally.

Data-driven decision-making, another TQM aspect, is emerging slowly (e.g., using exam results or survey data to make changes as noted in a few cases). The broader adoption of data analytics for quality (like tracking KPI trends on enrollment, pass rates, student satisfaction) could greatly aid continuous improvement. Right now, decisions are often reactive or based on anecdotal evidence. TQM would push for a fact-based approach. The themes of QA readiness and policy–practice gap reflect that Nepali colleges need better systems – such as quality information systems and processes for regular review – to move into a continuous improvement mode.

Stakeholder Theory Perspective

Applying stakeholder theory, which advocates for engaging all stakeholders in defining and ensuring quality, reveals why quality culture remains weak. The review (Theme 4) clearly shows that stakeholders like students and employers are not systematically involved in QA in Nepal. This is both a symptom and a cause of the underdeveloped quality culture. Without stakeholder voices, the understanding of "quality" is likely to be narrow (perhaps just meeting university requirements). Moreover, stakeholders who feel alienated won't contribute to or pressure for improvements. For example, if students had a platform to voice concerns about outdated curricula or teaching methods, it could spur faculty to update pedagogy. If employers regularly communicated skill gaps they see in graduates, colleges might be motivated to enhance practical training or career counseling. The lack of these feedback loops means colleges operate with limited external reference points for quality.

One can argue that a culture of quality in an educational institution is characterized by open communication, trust, and shared goals among stakeholders. Currently, many Nepali colleges have an authoritarian or hierarchical culture (legacy of traditional academia) where students rarely question faculty, and faculty rarely question administration. Changing this dynamic is difficult but essential. Some initiatives, like involving students in IQAC sub-committees or inviting alumni to speak about their experiences, could start bridging the gap. The stakeholder perspective also underscores that quality should ultimately be

defined in terms of stakeholder satisfaction: Are students learning and succeeding? Are employers satisfied with graduates? Are faculty growing professionally? On these counts, Nepal has room to improve. There are worrying signs like graduates being seen as lacking employable skills (as noted in various policy discussions) and the continuing trend of students opting to study abroad due to perceived higher quality overseas. Engaging stakeholders in quality discussions could help align educational outcomes with expectations, thereby gradually improving satisfaction and trust in local institutions.

Comparing with International Models

The results align with what we see in similar contexts, but also highlight some unique points. Compared to India, Nepal's progress in QA is roughly where India was maybe 10-15 years after NAAC started – early adopters are accredited, but many colleges remain outside the QA net. One difference is scale: India's system had to make accreditation virtually compulsory to manage quality in tens of thousands of colleges. Nepal, with a smaller system (~1,500 HEIs), has the opportunity to achieve near-universal QA coverage if it acts decisively this decade. The Indian experience suggests that without mandates and incentives, many affiliated colleges will not voluntarily pursue QA because of cost or complacency. Our findings (Theme 2) support this – voluntary accreditation has left gaps. So, Nepal might consider phasing in mandatory QA (e.g., requiring all affiliated colleges to at least undergo QAA by a certain year) along with support to do so. The structured process that India uses (SSR, peer review, grading) could be emulated; indeed, Nepal's QAA process is already similar in design, but needs scaling and stricter enforcement.

From Malaysia, the main lesson is about integrating quality with broader policy and fostering a positive attitude toward QA. The literature noted that compliance in Malaysia "provides scope to balance standards with creativity" (Crosling, 2017) – essentially turning QA into a collaborative process where institutions take ownership. In Nepal, QA is still seen as externally imposed, sometimes grudgingly accepted. The discussion of quality culture repeatedly returns to internal motivation. If Nepal can reframe QA from being an obligation to being an opportunity (for instance, an opportunity to secure more funding, attract students, or achieve recognition), colleges might embrace it more. The strategic recommendation would be to connect QA outcomes with tangible benefits – Malaysia did this by tying it to internationalization and competitiveness (Mahbub, 2017). Nepal could tie QA to, say, and autonomy: colleges that demonstrate strong QA could be given more autonomy or resources, empowering them further (this approach has been tried in India too with "autonomous college" status as a reward for good NAAC ratings).

The Bangladesh comparison reinforces what we found about internal QA significance. Bangladesh's insistence on strong IQAC functioning resonates with our Theme 3 and 5 (internal mechanisms and policy gap). The implication is that Nepal should invest in its IQAC network – perhaps creating a national IQAC training program or community of practice where QA officers from different colleges share experiences. The review shows many IQACs currently exist in name only; turning them into engines of quality requires training, networking, and modest funding (like seed money for QA projects at college level). Bangladesh's progress in a short time suggests that once institutions start internal self-assessment seriously, it can accelerate overall QA readiness for accreditation.

Quality Conceptions (Harvey & Green, Garvin)

The prevailing approach to quality in Nepal's higher education, as gleaned from policies and how accreditation is structured, seems to align with "fitness for purpose" and "minimum standards (threshold)" conceptions. Accreditation standards essentially ensure fitness for purpose – e.g., does the college meet the purpose of delivering an approved curriculum with adequate facilities – and a notion of quality as meeting a set bar (value for money in terms of public accountability). This

is a necessary foundation; however, it does not necessarily ensure excellence or transformation. Harvey and Green (1993) would argue that a transformative view of quality – where the focus is on the enhancement of students (their knowledge, skills, personal development) – is the ultimate goal for education. Our review suggests that the transformative aspect is not yet front-and-center in QA discussions in Nepal. Metrics like graduate employability or student personal growth are not explicitly measured in current QA processes (though informally discussed).

Additionally, Garvin's dimensions of quality (originally for products but often analogized to education) include things like performance, features, reliability, conformance, durability, serviceability, aesthetics, and perceived quality. If we stretch these to education: performance could be student achievement, features could be variety of programs, reliability could be consistency of academic delivery, conformance is meeting standards, durability might be sustainability of outcomes, serviceability is support services, aesthetics could be learning environment, and perceived quality is reputation. Nepal's QA efforts have heavily emphasized conformance (to standards) and a bit of perceived quality (via accreditation status). But other dimensions like reliability (ensuring every cohort gets a consistent quality experience) and continuous performance improvement have not been systematically addressed. For instance, do colleges analyze year-to-year variations in results to ensure reliability? Not commonly. Or do they consider the "features" and added value their programs offer beyond basic curriculum (like research opportunities, extracurricular development) as part of quality? Rarely in QA documentation.

Nepal's higher education sector is undergoing a gradual shift in its approach to quality assurance, moving from a compliance-oriented framework toward a holistic quality culture. Strategic policy documents now emphasize outcome-based education, student-centered learning, and stakeholder participation as essential drivers of transformation. However, despite this promising vision, the challenge remains in effectively translating these concepts into practice within affiliated colleges and universities (Gautam & Shailashri, 2025;Mishra, 2023: Khadka, Acharya, & Bhandari, 2022)..Ultimately, the results highlight that building a sustainable quality culture will require addressing both structural elements (policy enforcement, resources, training – the "hardware" of QA) and cultural elements (values, attitudes, motivation – the "software" of QA). The themes show Nepal has made progress on the structural side by setting up frameworks and units; the cultural side – getting buy-in, participation, and continuous improvement mindset – is where most work remains.

Conclusion

This systematic review examined the state of quality management and assurance in Nepal's affiliated colleges and the factors shaping the development of a quality culture. The findings depict a higher education system at a crossroads: while Nepal has made notable progress in establishing the frameworks for quality assurance with national guidelines, accreditation systems, and growing awareness the implementation of these measures remains uneven and, in many cases, incomplete. The basic regulatory structures such as the UGC, EQAAC, and accreditation criteria are in place, yet many colleges lack the readiness, capacity, and resources to fully engage with them, resulting in quality assurance practices that are often superficial. Accreditation has served as an important starting point for quality enhancement, prompting improvements in certain institutions; however, when treated merely as an endpoint, it risks fostering a compliance mentality rather than a commitment to continuous improvement. Sustaining quality gains requires integrating accreditation into an ongoing cycle of enhancement, supported by strong internal mechanisms such as fully functional IQACs. At present, internal quality systems in many colleges operate below potential, with limited regular reviews, data-driven decision-making, and feedback loops.

Another critical gap is the minimal involvement of stakeholders particularly students in QA processes, despite their central role in defining educational outcomes. Building a genuine quality culture demands the active participation of students, faculty, and external partners, underpinned by trust, communication, and shared responsibility. The review also highlights a persistent policy–practice gap, driven by the difference between ambitious plans and on-the-ground realities, which can be addressed through a balanced approach that combines stronger accountability measures with targeted capacity-building support. Encouragingly, there are signs of progress, with some colleges emerging as role models, greater policy attention to quality, and increased international collaboration bringing in new ideas. Future research should explore case studies of institutions that have successfully improved quality and conduct longitudinal assessments of QA interventions to guide further policy refinement. Ultimately, transforming Nepal's higher education into a system where quality is a self-sustaining element of institutional culture will require sustained leadership, stakeholder engagement, and persistent effort. In such a culture, affiliated colleges will not only meet minimum standards but continuously strive for excellence, ensuring that the country's rapid expansion of higher education is matched by meaningful and lasting improvements in quality and impact..

Policy Implications and Recommendations

To strengthen Quality Management Support Systems (QMSS) and build a lasting quality culture in Nepal's affiliated colleges, the following strategic actions are recommended:

1. **Institutionalize Internal QA Cells (IQACs):** Require every affiliated college to establish a functional IQAC with adequate resources, trained personnel, and a clear mandate. Make IQAC formation a condition for affiliation renewal or funding, and require submission of Annual Quality Assurance Reports (AQARs). Provide national training and certification programs for QA officers to ensure effective internal monitoring.
2. **Build QA Capacity with Digital Tools:** Develop a centralized digital QA platform for tracking performance indicators (e.g., pass rates, faculty qualifications, resource allocation) and generating analytical dashboards. Conduct regular training, workshops, and e-learning programs on QA, and consider postgraduate diplomas in educational quality assurance to strengthen human capacity.
3. **Enhance Governance and Stakeholder Engagement:** Grant greater academic autonomy to accredited colleges and incentivize innovation in teaching and curriculum. Establish Quality Advisory Committees including employers, alumni, and students. Standardize stakeholder feedback mechanisms such as annual student satisfaction and graduate tracer surveys.
4. **Link Accreditation to Incentives and Accountability:** Tie funding, grants, and recognition to QA performance. Publicly list accredited institutions and introduce competitive rankings to drive improvement. Set clear timelines for all colleges to complete at least one accreditation cycle, with stricter oversight for non-compliant institutions.
5. **Adopt an Outcomes-Based QA Framework:** Shift focus from inputs to results by integrating Outcome-Based Education (OBE) into QA. Require institutions to define, measure, and report learning outcomes, graduate employment rates, and employer satisfaction. Use findings to guide curriculum and teaching improvements.
6. **Foster a Continuous Quality Culture:** Promote leadership commitment to quality through recognition programs

(e.g., teaching excellence awards), peer learning networks, and inter-college best-practice sharing. Encourage quality circles and open dialogue to make quality improvement an institutional habit rather than a compliance exercise.

These recommendations should be implemented in a coordinated manner, combining capacity-building support with accountability measures. Lessons from countries like India and Bangladesh show that linking accreditation to both incentives and support can accelerate quality enhancement even in resource-constrained contexts.

References

Amutha, A. J., & Vijayaselvi, K. G. (n.d). *Impact of national assessment and accreditation council in the continuous development of HEI*. Holistic Pedagogical Approaches.

Assurance, E. Q., Secretariat, A. C., Pandey, R., & Subedi, B. P. (2023). *Transition to digital era of accreditation: Scope and challenges for emerging quality assurance agencies*. INQAAHE.

Bista, C. B. (2025). Quality assurance and continuous improvement in higher education: A case study of Nepal. *AMC Multidisciplinary Research Journal*, *4*(1), 13–26.

Biswakarma, G., & Dhakal, N. (2023). Policy implementation of quality assurance and accrdiation in the Nepalese higher education institutions offering hospitality education. *International Journal of Quality in Education*, *8*, 30–60.

Crosling, G. (2017). Quality assurance and quality enhancement in Malaysian higher education. In *The rise of quality assurance in Asian higher education* (pp. 127–141). Chandos Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-100553-8.00004-5

Elmelhy, M., Yusuf, A., Alawi, N. A., & Hussein, M. (2023). *The influence of TQM successful implementation on international student satisfaction in Malaysian Universities*. https://doi.org/10.36348/gajeb.2023.v05i05.002

Garvin, D. A., & Quality, W. D. P. (1984). Really mean. *Sloan Management Review*, 25, 25–43.

Gautam, T. P. (2025). Role of students' feedback to faculty members for institutional quality support system in community colleges in Bagmati Province. *NPRC Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*, *2*(5), 42–82. https://nepjol.info/index.php/nprcjmr/article/view/79672

Gautam, T. P. (2025). Strengthening knowledge management practices in Kathmandu's community colleges. *Journal of Productive Discourse*, *3*(1), 125–141. https://doi.org/10.3126/prod.v3i1.78476

Gautam, T. P., & Adhikari, B. R. (2025). Drivers of skilled workforce migration from Nepal. *State, Society and Development*: *PMPD Perspectives*, *3*(01), 135–156. https://doi.org/10.3126/ssd.v3i01.81315

Gautam, T. P., & Shailashri, V. T. (2025). Core components of quality education in the quality management support system: A systematic review. *SAIM Journal of Social Science and Technology*, *2*(1), 25–42. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16879620

Gautam, T. P., Mishra, A. K., & Shailashri, V. T. (2025). Enhancing digital transformation and green HRM through human-AI collaboration: A supply chain-inspired framework for institutional quality support in community colleges of Bagmati province, Nepal. *NPRC Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*, *2*(7), 105–137. https://doi.org/10.3126/nprcjmr.v2i7.80610

Gautam, T. P., Mishra, A. K., & Shailashri , V. T. (2025). Practice and policy implecations of quality assurance and accreditation: A Review. *GS WOW*: *Wisdom of Worthy Research Journal*, *4*(1), 85–105. https://nepjol.info/index.php/gswow/article/view/82915

Ghimire, D. M., & Timilsina, J. (2022). Quality assurance and accreditation issues in Nepalese higher education. *Patan Pragya*, *11*(02), 47-55. https://doi.org/10.3126/pragya.v11i02.52008

Harvey, L., & Green, D. (1993). Defining quality. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, *18*(1), 9–34. https://doi.org/10.1080/0260293930180102

Ismail, A., & Wahab, A. (2013). *The development of a new Malaysian Skills Qualification Framework* (*MSQF*) *in the context of national dual training system* [Doctoral dissertation, Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia].

Jaffer, S., Ng'ambi, D., & Czerniewicz, L. (2009, July 5–8). Learning, information and communication technology, and efficiency in higher education. In *Proceedings of the UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education*, Paris, France. UNESCO.

Khadka, D. K., Acharya, G., & Bhandari, N. P. (2019). Higher education quality assurance and accreditation in Nepal: Status, issues, and policies. *Proceedings of the Asia-Pacific Quality Network Annual Academic Conference 2019*, Colombo, Sri Lanka. https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.14937.43366

Lee, L. S. Y. (2011). Affiliated colleges in South Asia: Is quality expansion possible? World Bank.

Mahbub, R. (2017). Quality assurance for higher education: Challenges in sustaining continuous quality improvement for Malaysian universities. In *Proceedings of the 11th International Technology, Education and Development Conference* (*INTED2017*) (pp. 5204–5210). IATED. https://doi.org/10.21125/inted.2017.1214

Mishra, A. K., & Nepal, A. (2022). Be prepared for futuristic sustainable academic operation. *Proceedings of the 9th International Conference on Modern Education and New Learning Technologies*, 63–67. Princeton Press. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7748843

Mishra, A. K. (2022, October 23). *Teaching and research operation at Pokhara University*. Pokhara University. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4256252

Mishra, A. K. (2023). Digital academic operation: A case of Nepal. In P. K. Paul, D. Gurrapu, & E. R. K. (Eds.), *Digital education: Foundation and emergence with challenges, cases* (pp. 219–228). New Delhi Publishers. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8066273

Paudel, D. R., Yadav, U. S., G.C., S. B., Gurung, S. K., Sapkota, P., & Baral, R. P. (2021). Socioeconomic determinants of employment and further study status of university graduates: Evidence from a higher educational institute of Nepal. *Quest Journal of Management and Social Sciences*, *3*(1), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.3126/qjmss.v3i1.37575

Rahnuma, N. (2020). The Bangladeshi higher education quality assurance framework: a pathway for transformation. *Quality in Higher Education*, *26*(1), 14–31. https://doi.org/10.1080/13538322.2020.1729309

Sapkota, T. (2025). Quality culture in higher education institutions in Nepal: Experiences and perceptions of students, teaching and non-Teaching Staff. Academia *Journal of Humanities & Social Sciences 2*(1), 13–25.

Stella, A. (2002). *External quality assurance in Indian higher education: Case study of the national assessment and accreditation council*. New Trends in Higher Education.

University Grants Commission Nepal. (n.d.). *Quality assurance and accreditation guidelines*. University Grants Commission.