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A Media Analysis on the Current Situation of Nepalese Higher Education Policy Discourse

Organized by HISAN and Khabar Education.com

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Abstract

The higher education system in Nepal faces multiple challenges, including low enrollment rates, political interference, outdated curricula, and poor alignment with labour market demands. The transition to federalism has further complicated governance and funding distribution, leading to disparities between institutions. Additionally, increasing numbers of students seek education abroad due to dissatisfaction with domestic opportunities. This study analyzes media discourse on higher education policies, particularly discussions hosted by Khabar Education.com and HISAN. Using qualitative analysis, the study examines issues such as governance inefficiencies, the impact of political influence, and curriculum-market misalignment. The findings highlight gaps in policy implementation, the need for structural reforms, and calls for depoliticization and modernization of higher education institutions. While recent policy efforts aim to address these concerns, their effectiveness remains uncertain. Without systemic reforms and strong governance, Nepal's higher education sector risks further decline.

Keywords: *Higher Education, Policy Implementation, Political Interference, Curriculum Reform*

Introduction

The current situation of higher education in Nepal holds significant potential for improvement, but it has several critical challenges. Expanding access to higher education remains troubled by structural inefficiencies, policy shortcomings, and inadequate alignment with labour market demands (Agarwal, 2006). One of the major concerns is the low enrollment rate in higher education, which was only 14.9% in 2019/20, significantly lower than the global average and other developing countries like India and Vietnam (Joshi, 2018). This low enrollment indicated several factors, including financial limitations, geographical barriers, and the limited availability of quality institutions outside major urban centres. The transition to federalism has further complicated the allocation and distribution of educational funds, leading to disparities in the quality of education between public and private institutions. Hachhethu (2002) argues that public universities serve most students and often struggle with outdated curricula, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient research opportunities. These issues have resulted in a high rate of students seeking education abroad, with over 92,000 students obtaining permission to study foreign in the fiscal year 2079/080 alone. This brain drain removes Nepal from its talented youth and significantly impacts the economy, with an estimated annual loss of [specific amount] in remittances.

The problem of political interference may be a significant barrier to the improvement of higher education in Nepal. Universities, particularly public ones like Tribhuvan University, have become fields for political ideologies, such as [specific political ideologies], which has hampered their ability to function efficiently and independently. Political interference has also led to frequent strikes and disruptions, undermining the academic calendar and the timely publication of results (Kafle, 2013). It may have increased the internal inefficiencies within these institutions, such as poor management and communication, often cited as reasons for the discontent among students and faculty. Moreover, the relevance of higher education to the labour market is a pressing issue. The current system heavily depends on traditional academic disciplines, with limited emphasis on technical and vocational training that could better meet the needs of the modern economy. This disparity has contributed to the high unemployment rate among graduates, particularly in fields such as STEM, where the quality of education

is perceived to be lower than that available abroad. As a result, many students prefer to choose these disciplines in other countries, with higher chances of securing employment.

In response to these challenges, there have been calls for significant reforms, including revising the curriculum to make it more market-oriented, reducing political interference in universities, and improving the overall management of higher education institutions (Acharya, 2021). The government has recognized these issues and has made some efforts to address them, such as through the National Education Policy 2019/20, which emphasizes the need for technical education, collaboration with international institutions, and the promotion of research and innovation. However, much work remains to be done to ensure that these policies are effectively implemented and that the higher education system in Nepal can meet the needs of its students and the broader economy. Overall, while there are some positive developments, the higher education sector in Nepal is at a critical stage. Without critical action, its problems could soon lead to a full-blown crisis.

As a teacher, in my personal experience of 13 years of teaching and learning at Tribhuvan University, I have been constantly aware of the media coverage of Tribhuvan University despite its various positive aspects. The problems mentioned in the media are based on the old curriculum, disconnection from the labour market-driven curriculum, exam material errors, exam results delay political interference, failure to implement the academic calendar, brain drain, and equivalency problems. I am curious to investigate whether the issues are real or apparent, so I searched YouTube and read the video of khabar education.com about the current policy of higher education discourse organized by HISAN and khabar education.com. Therefore, it aimed to analyze the media covering the higher education policy discourse by Khabar education.com, which is relevant to the study.

Objectives

1. To explore the media coverage of current higher education policy discourse organized through khabar education.com
2. To analyze the challenges on higher education policy discourse organized through khabar education.com

Supporting Literature Review

The current situation of Nepalese higher education policy is a topic of considerable concern, characterized by challenges related to governance, quality assurance, equity, and alignment with global standards. This literature review synthesizes recent research and reports on the state of higher education policy in Nepal, highlighting key issues and potential areas for reform.

Governance issues in Nepalese higher education have been consistently highlighted as a significant barrier to the sector's development. The governance structure, which includes multiple layers of bureaucracy and political interference, has been criticized for its inefficiency and lack of transparency. According to a report by the University Grants Commission (UGC), these governance challenges have led to the delayed implementation of policies and reforms, contributing to the stagnation of the higher education sector (University Grants Commission, 2023). Moreover, the centralization of power within a few key institutions has made it challenging to adapt policies to the diverse needs of universities nationwide.

Quality assurance in Nepalese higher education remains inadequate, with many institutions struggling to meet even basic standards. The UGC has established quality benchmarks, but their enforcement has been inconsistent, leading to significant disparities in educational outcomes between institutions. The lack of a strong accreditation system has reduced these issues, with many universities failing to achieve international standards. A study by Bhattarai (2023) notes that the absence of a comprehensive quality assurance framework has resulted in widespread dissatisfaction among students and employers, who often find that graduates are not adequately prepared for the workforce. The equity of access to higher education in Nepal is another primary concern, particularly for students from rural and disadvantaged backgrounds. Despite the government's commitment to increasing enrollment rates, access remains uneven. The transition to a federal governance system has complicated resource distribution, leading to disparities between provinces (NIPoRe, 2023). Additionally, the rising cost of higher education and insufficient financial aid and scholarship programs have made it increasingly difficult for students from lower-income families to pursue higher education. As a result, many students opt to study abroad, further exacerbating the brain drain problem in Nepal.

A recurring theme in the literature is the misalignment between the higher education curriculum and the needs of the labour market. Studies have shown that many university programs are outdated and do not equip students with the skills required for modern jobs (Sharma, 2024). This disconnect has contributed to high unemployment rates among graduates, particularly in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. Efforts to revise the curriculum have been slow, and there is a need for a more dynamic approach that involves greater collaboration between universities and industry. The internationalization of higher education in Nepal has been limited, with few institutions engaging in meaningful partnerships with foreign universities. This lack of international collaboration has hindered the development of a global perspective among students and faculty and has limited opportunities for research and innovation. However, recent efforts have attracted foreign universities to establish campuses in Nepal, which could help raise standards and provide more opportunities for students to engage with global academic communities (World Bank, 2024).

Methodology

A qualitative research method was used for this study: a YouTube video search. We found higher education policy discourse organized by HISAN and khabar education.com (2023). We heard this video and transcribed it. The themes were built from the coding of the transcribed video. The analysis carried out based on the theme and reflection of the researchers are also blended at the end of the study.

Issues Raised in Higher Education Policy Discourse

In the policy discourse organized by Hisan and Khabar Education.com based on the current situation of Nepal's higher education, various speakers discussed the non-implementation of the annual academic calendar in TU and other universities, lack of employment-oriented education, and fee determination.

As the participant, the joint secretary S_1 of the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology, informed that no matter how much policy has been addressed, the desired results have not been achieved, and he intends to change the way of working in the future and that community colleges and private colleges should be merged. Is there a crisis in higher

education? I think the crisis has not come yet, but if the current situation continues, the crisis will come. Before COVID, 30 to 32 thousand students took no objection letters, with a two to three-year gap between them. As this number has increased, there are signs of trouble in higher education. A UK report on Governance in Higher Education was published in 2020. Two hundred sixty people were asked 32 questions to 20 higher education officials.

What can be learned from that report? The question has arisen: to what extent have our officers committed and internalized our university's vision, mission, and goals? Now, it would be better to move towards what can be done to improve the university. In the movie *Jaya*, the feeling of saluting the three people should be changed now. Even now, if you have to work within the current law, we cannot do anything well work.

Similarly, other participants The Rector of Tribhuvan University, Professor P₁, expressed his concern that political interference in the university has taken a cultural form. He emphasized that the minimum infrastructure of a university should be utilized to improve higher education. He promised that there would be no delay in the publication of the results. The university's curriculum is old and not market-oriented, teachers have not had professional training, the calendar has not been applied, results have not come on time, and the research centre has not done the research; these topics came up in this discussion. However, as said here, the courses are not old but have been changed according to time.

Meetings have been held several times with the Biswobidhyalaya Grants Commission to connect the curriculum with the market. The subject of this study is whether the students have gone to study abroad or for any other work.

The central president of HISAN (2023) expressed the opinion as the organizer that schools should be made accessible from strikes and politics. It was expressed that students would not be in crisis if the university calendar were regular. If the preparatory universities are completed, there will be 25 universities and health science centres and

1432 campuses, 147 private, 538 community, and 747 private campuses in the spread of higher education.

This spread has reached our context and seems to require some quality improvement.

As the speaker, a professor P₂ at the American Military University, said, there is a problem in higher education because the policy is not good. He emphasized that the university should be free from politics, the curriculum should be according to the market demand, the quota system should be removed in the context of affiliation, and if the best foreign university should come to Nepal, affiliation should be given. We have 106 colleges, and four hundred and forty-five thousand students are not in any other university; this is a matter of pride for us. Creates a market-driven course in foreign countries. If the students do not get a job after taking a course, that course is dropped, and a new course is created.

It is a habit of Nepali people to know too much about others without paying attention to their own. That's why you should be knowledgeable only about your subject.

Similarly, the president of the Nepal Parents Federation (2023) suggested improving the examination system in Nepal's high schools. He stressed that the three-hour examination system should be abolished, political interference should be stopped, and education should be reformed by creating a unified education policy system. Another professor, P₃, emphasized that the three-year undergraduate course should be revised and made four years. The Vice Chancellor of Kathmandu University (2023) said that if he tried to do something good, he would give pain in the name of explanation by using various excuses. He emphasized that university politics should be stopped forever.

I am happy with the interest the Higher Education Grants Commission shows in the reform of higher education and the start of the debate on the problem of it.

Analysis and Interpretation of Information

The discourse organized by HISAN and Khabar Education.com on the current state of Nepal's higher education provides a multifaceted view of the challenges and

proposed solutions. The discussion brings forward critical concerns, such as the non-implementation of academic calendars, lack of employment-oriented education, political interference, and outdated curricula. However, while the discourse highlights these issues, it also reflects a broader systemic problem within Nepal's higher education system: the gap between policy formulation and implementation.

Policy Implementation Gaps

The joint secretary of the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology acknowledges that despite policies, the desired outcomes have not been realized. His observation that there is no immediate crisis in higher education but that one arises if current trends continue is telling. The mention of the increase in students seeking "no objection letters" to study abroad signals a growing disillusionment with the domestic education system. This exodus of students might indicate a lack of faith in the ability of local institutions to provide quality education, highlighting the need for urgent reforms (Khabar Education, 2023).

Political Interference and Infrastructure Issues

The Rector of Tribhuvan University points out that political interference has become culturally ingrained in the university system. This interference often hampers the functioning of universities, leading to delays in academic activities and the deterioration of institutional autonomy. Furthermore, he emphasized that utilizing university infrastructure effectively suggests that while resources may exist, they are not optimally used. This is a common issue in many developing countries where political patronage and bureaucracy impede the efficient functioning of educational institutions (Bhusal, 2023).

Curriculum and Employment Orientation

The discussion also touches on the relevance of the university curriculum, with conflicting views presented. While some argue that the curriculum is outdated and not aligned with market needs, others, like Professor Bhushal, claim that updates have been made in collaboration with the University Grants Commission. However, the real test is whether these updates translate into better graduate employment outcomes. The mention of market-driven courses in foreign universities, as highlighted by Professor Adhikari, contrasts sharply with the situation in Nepal, where graduates often struggle to find jobs relevant to their field of study. This disconnect between education and employment is a

critical issue that must be addressed to improve the relevance of the higher education system (Adhikari, 2023).

The Role of Governance and Quality Control

Governance in higher education is another focal point of the discourse. The 2020 UK report on governance, referenced by Dr. Lamsal, raises questions about the commitment of university officials to their institutions' vision, mission, and goals. This lack of commitment could be the root cause of many problems discussed, including the failure to implement the academic calendar and the absence of a research-oriented culture. Effective governance is crucial for ensuring that policies are well-formulated and well-executed (Lamsal, 2023).

Calls for Structural and Policy Reforms

Various speakers, including Professor Adhikari and Professor Gautam, suggest structural changes such as revising the three-year undergraduate course to four years and abolishing the three-hour examination system in high schools. These suggestions align with global trends where education systems are evolving to become more flexible, student-centred, and aligned with contemporary demands. However, the success of these reforms will depend on their careful implementation and the political will to sustain them over time (Gautam, 2023; Thapa, 2023).

The Need for Depoliticization and Unified Policies

A recurring theme in the discourse is the need to depoliticize universities and create a unified education policy system. Political interference not only disrupts the academic environment but also undermines the credibility and autonomy of educational institutions. A unified policy system could provide a more coherent and consistent framework for higher education, reducing the current fragmentation and inefficiencies. The emphasis on the importance of the Higher Education Grants Commission's role in driving these reforms is notable, as it underscores the need for strong leadership and coordination in the sector (Silwal, 2023).

Our Critics in the Higher Education Policy Discourse

Politics is necessary for the development of every country. It is the greatest policy, and all policies are formed from politics. Policies like national education policy, higher education policy, national curriculum framework, etc. That all is possible through

the good politics in the nation. Nowadays, in our country, the meaning of politics has changed as negative critics like institutions locked by the students and politicians without discourse, individual self-centric, egocentric, individual biased, rather than cooperation-centred activities are visualized in recent days. However, the meaning of politics has been interpreted in negative ways. The policies and politics concerned with the many social theories like conflict theory focus on the transformation of society through the revolutionary shift in education taught in university curricula through the professors that's why they argue on depoliticizing the higher education in the policy discourse. In discourse, higher education taught outdated curriculum. However, our context of the curriculum has recently been revised to integrate ICT and try to connect with the labour market driven. Similarly, in discourse, most participants shared their views about the research center not conducting research. It is only a rumour in the context of TU. There are four research centres, CERID, RECAST, CEDA, and CINAS, with data related to education, humanities, and science. All research centres engage in enough national and international research and publish the articles of many teachers and educators in the journal.

Conclusion

The discourse highlights the complexity of challenges facing Nepal's higher education system, ranging from governance issues and political interference to curriculum relevance and policy implementation gaps. While the speakers offer a variety of solutions, the overarching message is clear: Without systemic reforms and a commitment to depoliticizing education, Nepal's higher education system risks further decline. The emphasis on aligning education with market needs, improving governance, and ensuring effective policy implementation are critical steps towards achieving the desired outcomes. However, the success of these measures will depend on sustained political will and the active participation of all stakeholders in the education sector.

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