

FROM CONNECTIVITY TO COMPETENCY: DIRECTING NEPALI "IT DECADE" IN ACADEMIA

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The year 2025 marks a critical chapter in the history of Nepali education. With the governmental formal declaration of the 2024–2034 "IT Decade,". The conversation in our staff rooms and lecture halls has shifted. We are no longer merely asking *if* we should use technology. We are now grappling with *how* to use it ethically, equitably, and effectively. This issue of the *A Bi-annual South Asian Journal of Research & Innovation* brings together a diverse array of studies that capture this transition. A transition from the reactive "emergency remote teaching" of the pandemic era to a proactive, strategic digital transformation.

Perhaps the most significant development discussed by our contributors this year is the endorsement of the National AI Policy 2082 (2025). This framework is not just a technical document; it is a pedagogical signal. It has aimed to train 5,000 AI professionals and establish AI Excellence Centers in all seven provinces. The state is finally recognizing that digital literacy is a foundational human right. However, as several papers in this issue argue, a "human-centric" approach is vital. We must ensure that AI tools like the personalized learning assistants currently being piloted in Myagdi and Pokhara augment the teacher-student relationship rather than replace the nuances of local mentorship. Despite the fact that internet penetration has reached nearly 95% in terms of signal coverage. Our researchers highlight a stark Digital Paradox. While urban centers like Kathmandu and Pokhara are experimenting with Generative AI and smart classrooms, rural schools in provinces like Karnali still struggle with the "first-level" digital divide: erratic electricity and a lack of hardware.

As we stand on the precipice of the 2025/26 academic session, the road ahead is as clear in its direction as it is steep in its ascent. The "Digital Nepal" we envision is no longer a distant mirage but a tangible goal that requires a shift from sporadic pilot projects to a unified national strategy. Our national strategy has been seduced by the tangible allure of hardware. While the distribution of laptops and the installation of fiber optics

are necessary, they are insufficient. We must pivot our fiscal and intellectual capital toward Human Infrastructure. True transformation occurs not when a teacher is handed a tablet, but when that teacher is empowered with the pedagogical fluency to use it. We advocate for a shift from "one-off" workshops to longitudinal professional development. This involves creating local communities of practice where veteran educators and digital natives collaborate to redefine classroom engagement. In the context of Nepal's 2025/26 budget, "investment" must be measured by the increase in teacher confidence and the subsequent quality of student interaction, rather than the mere count of devices deployed in district headquarters.

The burden of digital innovation cannot, and should not, rest solely on the shoulders of the Ministry of Education. We are witnessing a burgeoning EdTech startup ecosystem within Nepal—local innovators who understand the nuances of the Nepali curriculum and the constraints of our bandwidth. The path forward requires a formalized synergy where the government provides the regulatory framework and the private sector provides the agile, curriculum-aligned tools. We need locally-developed platforms that can function offline in the high-altitude schools of Humla while offering the same sophisticated analytics as global platforms. By leveraging this local expertise, we ensure that our digital tools are not "imported solutions" but "indigenous innovations" tailored to the Nepalese psyche and linguistic diversity.

As we integrate Artificial Intelligence and Big Data into our administrative and grading systems, we must maintain a posture of Ethical Vigilance. The rapid adoption of AI brings with it the looming shadow of "digital colonization"—the risk that our educational data is harvested by global tech giants without reciprocal benefit to our citizens. Our academic institutions must lead the charge in establishing robust data privacy protocols that protect the vulnerability of our students. We must ask: *Who owns the data generated in a Nepali classroom? How do we ensure that AI algorithms do not bake in urban biases that further marginalize our rural learners?* The 2025/26 session must be the year we draft our own "Digital Code of Ethics," ensuring that while we use global technology, we retain our national and intellectual sovereignty.

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