



Student Assessment in Higher Education: Perspectives and Practices from a Practitioner Inquiry

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Abstract

Student assessment in higher education is the systematic process of evaluating learners' academic performance, skills and competencies to ensure quality learning outcomes and guide instructional improvement. This study investigates how teachers at Tribhuvan University perceive student assessments, exploring their experiences with various evaluation methods in higher education. It highlights the effectiveness and challenges teachers face during these processes. Utilizing a practitioner enquiry and phenomenological design of qualitative research approach, this study gathers data through in-depth interviews with four university teachers and focus group discussion with five students of higher education based on purposive sampling. It delves into teachers' and students' lived experiences regarding assessment practices. The findings not only shed light on the multifaceted perceptions of grading systems and assessment strategies but also offer valuable insights into enhancing the fairness and quality of student evaluation. The implications of this study are significant, offering recommendations informed by practitioner enquiry to guide policymakers, academic leaders and educators in refining student assessment practices, ultimately enhancing learning outcomes and enriching educational experiences.

Keywords: Internal assessment, learning strategies, learning outcomes, academic performance

Introduction

Assessment measures student performance and guides teaching methods. It also helps to improve curriculum and maintain accountability. Assessment methods have changed from only using exams to using different ways like project work, peer review, and digital tools. Today, education focuses more on students and real-world skills,

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so assessments are used to promote deep learning and critical thinking. Assessment is a cornerstone of the educational process, profoundly shaping student learning and influencing the overall quality of higher education (Gallardo-Fuentes et al., 2025). Assessment holds greater importance in higher education for shaping students' teaching learning processes and evaluating curriculum effectiveness (Grant, 2008). It influences how students learn and how teachers plan their lessons. As education moves toward student-centered learning, it is important to understand how teachers feel and think about assessment.

In Nepal, Tribhuvan University (TU) is the oldest and largest university. It has many campuses and a diverse student population. But, most discussions about assessment at TU focus on policy and exams, not on teachers' daily experiences. Teachers' beliefs and experiences affect how they use assessments, which also affects student learning and fairness (Rasooli et al. 2023). This study looks into how teachers at TU experience and understand assessment. It tries to show the problems and opportunities they face. The goal is to improve assessment so that it meets teaching goals and supports different types of students. TU uses many types of assessments, but keeping them consistent across all programs is difficult. Teachers have different opinions and face many challenges in using assessment. Understanding these views is important to make assessments better and fairer.

Although student assessment is a complex, social and multidimensional aspect of higher education management, TU teachers primarily manage it through their daily schedules and session plans using modern technology. However, there is a lack of comprehensive research examining how these practices impact training improvement, policy development, and professional growth, which hinders efforts toward holistic development in the institution. This study aims to explore how TU teachers understand and use student assessment. It looks at what helps or stops them from using good assessment practices. The findings will help improve how assessments are done in Nepal's higher education system.

Literature Review

Assessment in higher education is a key for measuring students' success and influencing their learning and identity. In Nepal, research shows that assessment methods are changing, showing improvements but also facing ongoing challenges in matching modern educational aims. The study on secondary English teachers in Nepal found internal assessment dominated by assessment of learning, with limited focus on formative methods. Large classes and low professional commitment reduced it to a formality, highlighting the need for balanced, formative practices (Saud et al., 2024). The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2079 emphasizes competency-

based, student-centered, and continuous assessment in higher education, focusing on practical skills, critical thinking, and holistic learning. Assessments blend internal (40–50%) and external (50–60%) evaluations through projects, presentations, exams, and research. Key practices focus on semester and credit systems, letter grading, alternative assessments, digital tools, Quality Accreditation and Assurance (QAA) alignment, and self-assessment, emphasizing inclusivity, flexibility, feedback, and student self/peer assessments to enhance academic integrity and continuous improvement.

Nepal's student assessment system, vital for teaching and learning, faces challenges. This review explores its concepts, policies, and evolution, showing its impact on curriculum and student progress, while highlighting cultural influences and persistent inconsistencies (Shah, 2021). Assessment, often perceived as an objective measure of learning outcomes, extends beyond mere evaluation, profoundly shaping students' identities and experiences within the academic realm (Nieminen, 2024). Modern assessment approaches are not solely focused on cognitive understanding but consider the holistic competence of students, encompassing affective and psychomotor domains (Wahyuni et al., 2021). The assessment practices at Tribhuvan University, revealing a dominance of grade-focused assessment. Rooted in Vygotsky's theory, it advocates shifting to learner-centered approaches that promote creativity, reflection, and problem-solving for 21st-century readiness (Luitel, 2022). This study explores Tribhuvan University students' perceptions of internal assessments under the semester system. Most students viewed it positively, noting improved motivation and engagement.

However, concerns included inconsistent implementation, time constraints, and bias (halo effect) in scoring (Adhikary, 2023). Together, these studies suggest that while Nepal's higher education system is gradually moving toward more student-centered and formative assessment practices, significant work remains to bridge the gap between policy intentions and classroom realities. This literature review explores these dimensions in greater depth, critically examining how assessment practices influence curriculum implementation, teaching strategies, and student learning in the evolving context of higher education in Nepal.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the theoretical model of assessment of learning, assessment for learning and assessment as learning, a widely recognized framework that helps explain how assessment functions in educational settings. This framework provides a lens through which teacher perceptions and experiences with student assessment in higher education can be explored and understood.

Assessment of Learning

Assessment of learning refers to summative assessment practices used

primarily to evaluate student achievement at the end of an instructional period. These assessments, such as final exams, standardized tests, and large projects, serve as tools for grading and certification. From a theoretical standpoint, it is rooted in behaviorist and positivist traditions, where learning is viewed as a measurable outcome (Taras, 2005). In higher education contexts like Tribhuvan University, assessment of learning is often the dominant practice, as it aligns with institutional requirements for accountability and performance measurement (Biggs & Tang, 2011). However, this dominance may also restrict the adoption of more comprehensive and student-centered approaches to learning and assessment, which emphasize the development of a wide range of cognitive, emotional, social, and practical skills.

Assessment for Learning

Assessment for learning focuses on formative assessment, which is integrated into the teaching and learning process. It involves continuous feedback that helps both teachers and students identify learning gaps and adjust strategies accordingly. Theoretically, it is connected to constructivist learning theories, particularly those of Vygotsky and Bruner, which emphasize scaffolding and the active role of learners in constructing knowledge (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Bruner, 1996). Educators who implement it typically utilize tools such as quizzes, collaborative activities, and classroom discussions to support and monitor student development throughout the instructional period, rather than solely at its conclusion.

Assessment as Learning

Assessment as learning emphasizes student self-assessment and metacognitive awareness. It empowers learners to reflect on their own understanding, monitor their progress, and make decisions to improve their learning. This form of assessment draws from socio-constructivist theories and the concept of learner autonomy. In assessment as learning, teachers act as facilitators who guide students to take ownership of their learning through goal-setting, peer assessment, and self-reflection activities (Earl, 2013). This approach not only enhances student engagement but also promotes deeper understanding and lifelong learning skills.

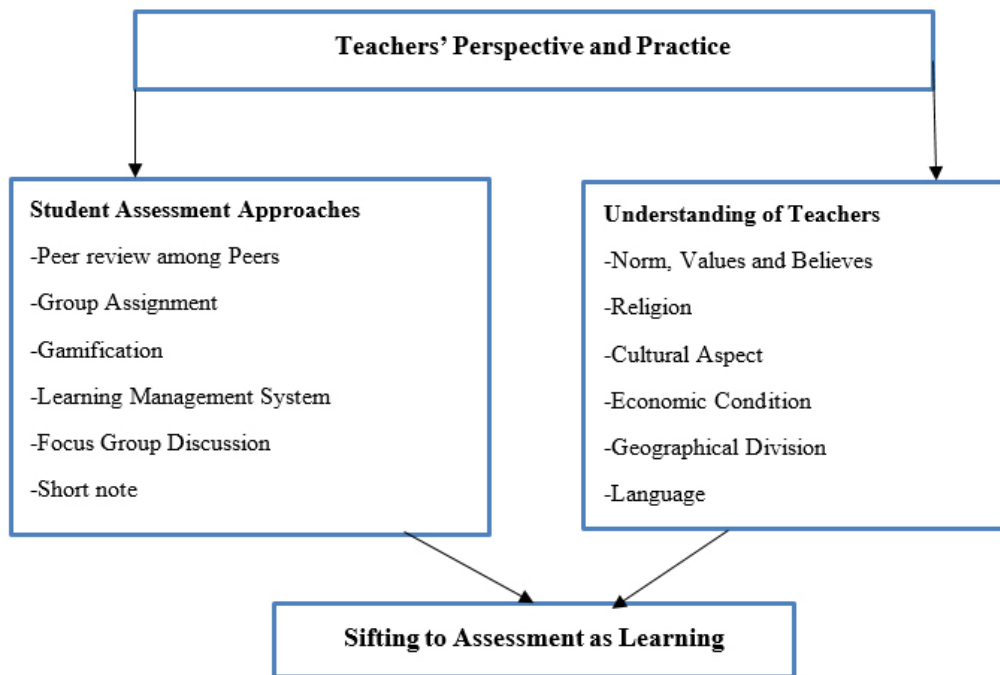
Conceptual Framework

The student assessment system is a key part of teaching and learning in higher education. While traditional methods like exams and papers are still common, they often don't reflect the full range of student skills. Recently, there's been a move toward more well-rounded and practical forms of assessment like group projects, portfolios, and peer reviews that encourage critical thinking and real-world learning. This

change supports modern educational goals focused on active and meaningful student engagement.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework



The student assessment system is the way higher institutions check and measure what students have learned, their skills, and how they are doing in their studies. It uses different methods to see how well students are meeting learning goals. This process also takes into account students' backgrounds, including their values, religion, culture, and different situations. In the past, the focus was on assessment of learning/assessment for learning but now it's shifting towards assessment as learning.

Methods and Procedures

This study uses two main research approaches: phenomenology and practitioner inquiry. Phenomenology focuses on understanding the real-life experiences and emotions of teachers and students, especially how they feel and think about assessment (Philipsen et al., 2019). It helps the researcher look beyond numbers or statistics and get to the heart of what people actually go through in their daily educational lives.

Practitioner enquiry is a method where teachers examine their own teaching practices in a thoughtful and systematic way. It allows educators to study what they do in the classroom with the goal of improving their work and making meaningful

changes (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). This method sees teachers not just as subjects in research but as key contributors who bring valuable insights from their own everyday experiences (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2019). In this case, the researcher is also a university teacher, which makes practitioner inquiry especially useful. It allows them to reflect on their own teaching and learning processes while also learning from others. To gather information, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with four university teachers from different departments within the Faculty of Education at Prithvi Narayan Campus in Pokhara. This qualitative study used purposive sampling to select participants based on their subject expertise, personal experiences of professional challenges, and diverse forms of academic involvement.

Additionally, a focus group discussion was conducted with five fourth-semester master's-level students to gain deeper insights into their perspectives. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, based on their consistent participation in classroom activities. The experiences of the teachers were presented using their own words to authentically reflect their viewpoints. The students' experiences mostly supported what the teachers said, so I referred to them in the third person instead of quoting them directly. This helped keep the focus on the teachers' viewpoints while still showing that students had similar concerns. These methods helped the researcher explore how teachers understand and use assessment, the challenges they face in applying it, and what kind of support they need to improve. The results of the study are practical and directly related to the local context, making them useful for improving both day-to-day classroom practices and broader educational policies.

Moreover, this study contributes to ongoing discussions about how to make assessment systems more fair, meaningful, and effective. It is a strong example of practitioner inquiry in action, as it deeply engages with the real experiences of teachers involved in higher education at Tribhuvan University. By critically examining their own practices, the teachers and the researcher are able to better understand assessment and contribute to positive changes in the education system.

Results and Discussion

This part of the study presents the main findings from in-depth interviews with university teachers and a focus group discussion with master's-level students. To protect participants' privacy, pseudonyms were used instead of real names. Before collecting data, informed consent was obtained, and all participants were told about the purpose and process of the study. To ensure the data was accurate and trustworthy, member checking was used. This section explains what was discovered during the research. The results are connected to the study's objectives and are supported by previous research and relevant theories. It helps make sense of the data, shows how it

answers the research questions, and explains what it reveals about the topic. The aim is to highlight the importance of the findings and their relevance to real-life situations.

The findings were developed through a careful process called thematic analysis, where common patterns and important ideas were identified and grouped into key themes. These themes came directly from the data and were refined through repeated review and interpretation. To make the analysis stronger and more reliable, the researcher compared information from different sources, in-depth interviews, focus groups, and other related aspects.

Different Views on Student Assessment

Teachers at Tribhuvan University have a range of opinions about student assessment. It is mainly a way to measure performance and assign grades. Others view it as a valuable teaching tool that helps improve learning, encourages critical thinking, and gives useful feedback to both students and teachers.

One of the participants Agrima highlighted the importance of using assessment to support learning. She said:

Assessment is not just about giving grades. For me, it is about seeing what students have actually learned and figuring out how I can help them grow.

This shows a student-centered approach, where assessment helps guide teaching and supports students' progress in different sectors of learning. From my experience, many students think assessment is just a formal test or exam. This often occurs because teachers unintentionally create a stressful or intimidating classroom environment, which can lead students to develop fear or anxiety toward the assessment process as a whole. Such environments discourage active participation and hinder student engagement. However, incorporating collaborative group work and interactive classroom activities into assessment practices can significantly enhance students' theoretical understanding. These approaches create a more inclusive and supportive atmosphere, encouraging all students to participate meaningfully and engage more deeply with the subject matter.

Another participant, Raman, shared a different point of view, focusing on how assessment is used more for evaluation within the university system. He explained:

In our setting, assessment is still mostly centered around exams. It is used more to rank students than to help them learn.

This response highlights how assessment is often treated as a tool for judging performance, especially through final exams. These types of tests tend to focus on grades and comparisons rather than truly understanding what students know or encouraging critical thinking. As a result, assessments may not always help students grow or develop deeper learning skills.

The next participants Riwaz supported a more balanced method by combining both formative and summative assessments. He noted that:

I try to include project work, presentations, and reflective journals along with traditional tests. This way, I get a more complete picture of each student's abilities.

In this above context students' views are also related to this context. One of my students, Rebika, also shared her experiences with me in the context of focus group discussion. She is the primary teacher in a remote village, and she takes her responsibilities very seriously. Despite her dedication, she feels unsupported by the school community. Many community members believe that her teaching efforts could negatively impact the local school culture and prefer she not focus on her studies. Despite her strong dedication to teaching, she feels a profound lack of support from the school community. Several community members hold the perception that her commitment to academic and professional development might disrupt the traditional culture of the local school. As a result, they discourage her from focusing on her studies and career advancement. She shared that this unsupportive environment has created significant obstacles in her efforts to pursue further education. The situation escalated when, on one occasion, certain members of the community went so far as to file a formal complaint against her with the District Education Office. This not only intensified her personal and professional challenges but also underscored the broader issue of limited community encouragement for teachers seeking professional growth and educational advancement.

This approach reflects a meaningful shift away from traditional, exam-centered evaluation methods, emphasizing a more comprehensive and student-centered assessment process. In my teaching context, I have also implemented various forms of alternative assessment, such as project-based assignments and journal writing tasks, as part of the higher education assessment system. These methods allow for a deeper understanding of each student's individual strengths, creativity, and critical thinking abilities. By incorporating such diverse assessment strategies, we move toward a more modern and holistic model of evaluation—one that not only measures what students know but also how they apply, analyze, and reflect on that knowledge in real-world and academic contexts. This broader perspective supports more meaningful learning and encourages students to engage with content in a thoughtful and active manner.

Traditional Assessment Still Dominates

Many teachers still depend mostly on traditional methods like written exams and assignments to assess students. These practices are common mainly because they align with existing institutional norms, help manage large class sizes, and are

familiar to most teachers. Many educators admit that such methods are simply more practical given the realities of their teaching environments. One of my participants Riya explained,

I use exams because it's what we have always done. It works for large groups. This response shows that routine and convenience often drive assessment choices more than new teaching strategies or innovation. Another participant Riwaz also pointed out the challenge of trying alternative methods in overcrowded classrooms:

With over fifty students in one classroom, it is just not realistic to assess them through portfolios or presentations. We don't have the time or resources. These highlights how big class sizes and limited resources make it hard to try more student-centered assessments. This shows how large class sizes and limited resources make it difficult to use more student-centered assessments. Even when teachers support these methods, their work conditions often make it hard to apply them. This also matches my own experience. Another participants Raman added another important perspective:

I have attended a few workshops on formative assessment, but we were never shown how to apply it in real classrooms. So, I stick with what I know. This shows a common issue teachers may hear about alternative assessment methods in training sessions, but without clear examples or continued support, they find it difficult to put those ideas into practice. Overall, these responses reveal that traditional assessments continue not because teachers are unwilling to change, but because they face real barriers like time, class size, lack of training, and institutional pressure. Still, many teachers show interest in more meaningful and holistic assessment approaches if they could get the right support and guidance to use them effectively.

Limited Use of Formative Assessment

There is limited implementation of formative assessment techniques such as peer assessment, classroom discussion, and self-reflection in the teaching-learning process. While teachers are well aware of the pedagogical value of these interactive assessment methods in enhancing student engagement and understanding, several constraints hinder their regular use. Common barriers include a lack of time, insufficient resources, and increasing administrative pressure to meet curriculum deadlines. One of the participants Riya expressed concern about time constraints, stating,

I often plan to include peer and group assessments, but by the time I complete the syllabus content, there's barely any room left. I end up relying on traditional tests.

This reflects the challenge of balancing content delivery with formative evaluation. Another participant Agrima highlighted resource limitations, saying, "We don't have

enough materials or training on how to conduct effective self-assessment or group tasks. Even if we want to do more, the support system is missing,

This suggests a need for professional development and institutional backing to integrate such assessments. Another participant Riyaz added, “I want to use more interactive assessments, but the schedule and workload don’t support it. This indicates that despite recognizing the benefits, the daily operational demands prevent teachers from adopting innovative assessment techniques. Together, these insights reveal a gap between teachers’ intentions and their practices, largely influenced by systemic and contextual barriers that need to be addressed to improve the use of formative assessments.

Challenges in Making Assessment Fair and Reliable

Challenges in Making Assessment Fair and Reliable refers to the problems educators encounter when trying to ensure that student assessments are both fair to all learners and consistently produce accurate, trustworthy results. Some of the teachers shared serious concerns about whether current assessment practices are truly fair or accurate. One major issue they brought up was the lack of consistent and standardized tools to evaluate students. Without clear guidelines, each teacher ends up using their own way of interpreting and applying the assessment criteria. This inconsistency often leads to results that don’t clearly show what students have actually learned or how well they’re really doing. As a result, students might be judged unfairly, and their true progress may go unnoticed.

One of participants Agrima emphasises the ethical pressure that teachers face:

We often face pressure to be lenient, which affects fairness and standards.

This kind of pressure from school leaders, parents, or social expectations can affect teachers’ ability to grade fairly, and it can lower the overall quality of education. Another participant, Riwarz, added that the lack of clear rubrics is a big problem:

Without proper rubrics, two teachers can grade the same student very differently.

It becomes more about perception than actual learning.

This inconsistency creates confusion and frustration for students and teachers alike and weakens trust in the whole assessment system. In this context, one of my students Ramita shared her experience with me. She said that they don’t have a proper way to assess their work differently. Also, student attendance doesn’t seem to matter in all parts of the process. Participant Raman emphasized how these issues affect the bigger picture:

When assessments are not valid or reliable, we cannot identify students’ true needs or progress. It is like making decisions in the dark.

Without accurate assessments, teachers cannot give meaningful feedback or support

students in the right way, which limits the effectiveness of teaching and learning.

Overall, these responses show a common concern: current assessment practices are often influenced by outside pressure, personal judgment, and a lack of proper tools. This not only affects the fairness and accuracy of grading but also damages the credibility of the education system. Teachers believe that in order to fix this, there needs to be urgent reform, better training in assessment methods, and clear policies to support fair and consistent evaluation.

Struggles to Ensure Fair and Accurate Assessment

Teachers shared strong concerns about whether current assessment methods are fair, unbiased, and truly reflect students' learning. One major issue that came up in many interviews was the lack of clear, standardized tools for assessment. Because there are no consistent guidelines, teachers often interpret grading criteria differently. As a result, student evaluations can vary widely and may not truly show what students have learned.

Participant Agrima spoke about the pressure teachers face:

I often face pressure to be mild, which affects fairness and standards.

This pressure from school leaders, parents, or even community expectations can make it difficult for teachers to grade honestly. It can lead to inflated grades and lower academic standards. Another participant, Raman raised another concern: the lack of clear grading rubrics.

Without proper rubrics, two teachers can grade the same student very differently.

It becomes more about perception than actual learning.

When grading is inconsistent, it creates confusion and frustration for both students and teachers. It also makes the assessment system seem unreliable. Another participant Riwarz, explained how these problems affect the bigger picture:

When assessments are not valid or reliable, we cannot identify students' true needs or progress. It is like making decisions in the dark.

Without accurate assessment, teachers cannot give helpful feedback or adjust their teaching to support students properly. This weakens the overall quality of education.

Together, these responses show a common concern among teachers: the current assessment system lacks fairness and trust. External pressure, unclear grading standards, and limited tools all contribute to unreliable results. Teachers believe that real change needs better training in assessment methods, clearer guidelines, and stronger policies to make the evaluation process more fair, consistent, and meaningful.

Need for Professional Development in Assessment Literacy

Teachers expressed a strong desire for practical workshops, hands-on training, and continued support from their schools to help them assess students in more meaningful and accurate ways. One of my participants Agrima noted that:

I need proper training to understand modern assessment methods and how to apply them.

In my experience, there are no opportunities for curriculum training programs, and many teachers feel unprepared to design and use effective assessment methods. In interviews, a common theme was that teachers lacked confidence in understanding and using modern student-centered assessment practices. Another participant pointed out the gap between traditional classroom assessments and newer approaches. They admitted finding it hard to move away from memorization-based testing toward more supportive tools like formative and diagnostic assessments.

Most of us are still using outdated methods because we were never trained in alternatives. We want practical workshops, not just theories.

Another participant stressed the heavy reliance on written exams and expressed uncertainty about using methods like rubrics, portfolios, or peer assessments. They emphasized the importance of hands-on, classroom-focused training.

Assessment is not just about exams anymore, but we have not been guided on what else to do. The school should also support us by giving time and resources.

They shared the view that even with training, teachers struggle to apply new strategies without time and support from their schools. They called for a coordinated effort that combines teacher training with real institutional backing.

Role of Institutional Policies and Academic Culture

Assessment practices are influenced significantly by institutional policies, academic traditions, and a lack of innovation within the university system. Many teachers express frustration with the constraints imposed by rigid curricula and outdated assessment regulations, which hinder meaningful reform and innovation. Rather than encouraging diverse or student-centered evaluation methods, universities often emphasize traditional examinations and grading systems, leaving little room for flexibility or experimentation.

Another participant Agrima, reflecting on this issue, stated,

Even if I want to try new methods, the system does not support change easily. This sentiment reflects the broader institutional resistance to pedagogical and assessment reform, even when educators are willing and motivated to innovate.

Another participant Riwarz echoed this challenge by adding, We are expected to follow the same exam patterns every semester. There is no training or discussion on alternative assessments like portfolios or project-based evaluations. It feels like assessment is just a formality rather than a tool for real learning.

This highlights the lack of professional development and institutional dialogue around assessment practices.

Similarly, another participant Raman shared, Our evaluation system is deeply rooted in rote memorization. If we try to assess critical thinking or creativity, students get confused, and sometimes even the administration questions our approach.

This study highlights the ongoing tension between individual educators' efforts to enhance assessment practices and the institutional norms that continue to uphold outdated academic traditions. From a theoretical standpoint, the findings can be understood through the lenses of assessment of learning, assessment for learning, and assessment as learning.

Most current practices at Tribhuvan University tend to emphasize assessment of learning, focusing primarily on summative evaluations such as exams and grades. While this approach provides a measure of student achievement, it often neglects opportunities for deeper engagement, reflection, and growth. In contrast, assessment for learning which emphasizes formative feedback to guide and improve student learning is still underutilized due to rigid institutional policies and lack of support structures. Even more overlooked is assessment as learning, where students actively engage in the assessment process to develop metacognitive awareness and take ownership of their learning journey.

Collectively, the responses in this study demonstrate how a lack of institutional support, inflexible policies, and deeply rooted academic traditions contribute to a stagnant assessment culture that resists innovation. Without meaningful systemic reform, even the most motivated and forward-thinking educators face significant barriers when attempting to align assessment practices with the needs and expectations of 21st-century learners.

By drawing on the lived experiences and reflective insights of university teachers, this study provides valuable, context-specific understanding of the current state of assessment at Tribhuvan University. It reveals not only the strengths of existing practices but also points to critical areas where transformation is needed particularly in integrating more formative and student-centered approaches that align with contemporary educational theories and global standards of quality learning and assessment.

This practitioner-centered perspective ensures that the findings are rooted in authentic classroom and institutional realities, making them highly relevant and actionable for those directly engaged in teaching and assessment.

Grounded in these rich, practitioner-informed insights, the study advances concrete recommendations aimed at enhancing the fairness, consistency, and overall quality of student assessments. In such a scenario, the traditional approach to assessment may fail to reflect the true capabilities of the students. This calls for a rethinking of how we embed learning experiences into the curriculum experiences that are flexible, inclusive, and capable of improving academic outcomes despite external challenges students face. Therefore, implementing assessment as learning is essential to transform the assessment system in higher education. Within the faculty of education, a significant majority of students are female. Many of them carry substantial household responsibilities, which can affect their academic engagement and time management.

Conclusion

This study offers valuable support to policymakers, academic leaders, and educators at Tribhuvan University by providing grounded insights into current assessment practices. It highlights existing challenges and promotes more inclusive, student-centered approaches that improve both learning outcomes and teaching experiences. The recommendations are drawn directly from teachers' lived experiences, ensuring they are practical and contextually relevant. Beyond institutional concerns, the study addresses broader social issues such as equity and access. It draws attention to the impact of students' socio-economic challenges particularly those working part- or full-time which often leads to absenteeism and limits the effectiveness of traditional assessment methods. By connecting academic, institutional, and social dimensions, this study calls for a more flexible and compassionate assessment system one that not only measures learning but also supports inclusion, empowerment, and social mobility.

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