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Practices of the Semester System in Higher Education: Insights from the University of Nepal

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Abstract

The semester system is an innovative approach to education that differs from the annual system. It emphasizes continuous student assessment, a flexible and market-driven curriculum, and learner-centered teaching methods. This study examines the implementation of a semester system at Valley University (pseudonym), Nepal. A mixed-methods approach was employed to gather quantitative data from 43 faculty members via a Google form, with seven faculty members chosen for in-depth interviews across five graduate schools at VU. The findings show that while faculty members view the semester system as a modern and innovative approach to higher education, its complete success is challenged by insufficient infrastructure, inconsistent academic calendars, irregular student attendance, inadequate teaching and learning resources, poor time management, an under-resourced library, and limited professional development opportunities for teachers. Faculty members discussed the need for curriculum revision and redesign to meet market-driven demands, effective administrative management, and the proper integration of technology in teaching and research. The study concludes that policy formulation, including the effective implementation of the semester system, teacher capacity building through professional development, and infrastructure investments, is necessary for the semester system to achieve its goals. The study's findings can improve existing practices and facilitate knowledge sharing among key university stakeholders.

***Keywords*:** Academic calendar, educational reform, internal assessment, university teacher

Introduction

A semester system is an academic structure that divides a year into two equal parts. In other words, an academic year is organized into two semesters, each lasting 14–16 weeks and comprising lectures, midterms, assignments, projects, and semester-end examinations, with final evaluations based on both internal assessments and summative examinations. The semester system is a widely recognized method of organizing higher education worldwide (Joshi, 2019; Patgiri, 2019). Its goal is to improve student learning outcomes through ongoing assessment, student-centered teaching and learning, and flexible curricula. The semester system is widely used in both developed and developing countries, highlighting its potential to enhance critical thinking, practical application of knowledge, and academic rigor (Malik & Shrestha, 2023). Pabla (2014) emphasizes the importance of the semester system, highlighting its support for continuous and in-depth learning, as well as its goal of developing students' abilities by fostering the necessary knowledge, skills, and positive attitudes. Nevertheless, in the South Asian context, the practice of the semester system has shown mixed results, as educational institutions face challenges in balancing its demands with infrastructural and administrative limitations.

In the Nepalese context, Tribhuvan University introduced the semester system in the 1970s. The system could not continue for an extended period and was replaced in the 1980s by an annual system due to administrative and logistical issues (Pokharel & Subedi, 2018). Regarding the discontinuation of the semester system, Joshi (2019) stated that it was a failure for several reasons. Some of these issues include insufficient and under-equipped infrastructure, poor administrative management, inadequate implementation of the academic calendar, the absence of fixed admission and enrollment criteria, irregular student attendance, and an under-resourced library. Later in 2014, Tribhuvan University reintroduced the semester system with a fresh hope of improving academic quality, ensuring timely student assessments, and aligning with global standards. However, challenges like inconsistent academic calendars, resource shortages, and inadequate faculty training have hindered its success (Dahal, 2018). Other universities in Nepal, such as Kathmandu University, Far Western University, Nepal Open University, and Mid-West University, have been running their various academic programs on a semester system since their inception.

Implementing the semester system effectively in Nepalese higher education institutions requires pedagogical and institutional changes. Both students and faculty members recognize its potential to improve learning and enhance quality. Addressing the problems encountered during implementation through academic, financial, and administrative strategies is crucial for successfully transforming Nepalese higher education to produce skilled manpower for various aspects of society and the country.

Against this backdrop, Valley University (VU) (pseudonym) of Nepal has adopted the semester system from its inception, demonstrating its strong commitment to delivering quality education. However, despite this commitment, the university faces several challenges related to student admissions, teaching and learning strategies, student assessment, and the proper implementation of the semester system in its true spirit. This study addresses a gap in Nepalese higher education: the lack of empirical, institution-specific analysis of the implementation of the semester system. By examining VU's experiences, this research provides evidence that can inform both institutional reforms and national policy decisions in Nepal.

Literature Review

Although the semester system is a popular approach to education, only a few studies have examined its implementation and effects in South Asian higher education. Jat (1970) examined teachers' perceptions of the semester system and found that most teachers viewed it positively. Similarly, Akhtar (1980) conducted a study of the semester system in a few Indian universities. He found that it was well-adopted by administrators, that teachers had considerable freedom in designing courses and grading students, that there were numerous ways to teach, and that there were numerous internal assessments. In Nepal, Chongbang (2014) conducted a comparative analysis of the semester and annual systems at the Faculty of Education, Tribhuvan University, and found that the semester system led to higher student pass rates, likely due to its structural benefits rather than changes in teaching methods. Bhutia and Subba (2015) reported on the practices of Sikkim's colleges, highlighting a rigorous framework that includes midterms, term papers, practical examinations, and semester-end examinations. Their findings highlighted the benefits of learning and the overall development of students. However, they faced challenges such as large classes, lengthy syllabi, a low-resourced library, and teacher favoritism in implementing the system. To overcome these challenges, they stated that continuous teacher feedback and a favorable rapport with students could help.

Sharma (2016) conducted a meta-analysis of the semester system in three countries: Nepal, India, and Pakistan. The study reported mixed results that varied depending on the context. Similarly, Dangi (2016) explored students' attitudes toward the semester system and found that they were generally satisfied with it. Furthermore, Pandit (2016) found a strong correlation between students' overall satisfaction and their perceptions of the quality of mathematics education. In agriculture, Pokharel, Jaishi, and Subedi (2018) found that more than half of the teachers and students valued curriculum relevance; however, dissatisfaction was common regarding co-curricular activities (49%), course coverage timelines (55%), and class regularity (89%) in the

semester system. Dahal (2018) also examined how students at the Nepal Commerce Campus (MBS program) in Kathmandu, Nepal, felt about the semester system. He emphasized the need for strategic improvements in academic resources, course organization and planning, physical resources, governance, and institutional image to enhance the system's effectiveness. His findings show that students' perceptions of all aspects are quite satisfactory, except for the toilets and canteen facilities on the campus. Sardar et al. (2019) identified teacher behavior and engagement as the main factors influencing student satisfaction in Pakistani universities. Similarly, Acharya et al. (2023) investigated teaching and learning mathematics under the semester system at Tribhuvan University. Their findings showed that the semester system has brought positive changes in teaching and learning practices. Moreover, the study found that the internal and external evaluation systems support students' overall development in general and the development of mathematical skills and knowledge in particular.

Despite a few studies on the semester system, including its effectiveness, perceptions, challenges, and coping strategies, research on the semester system at VU has not been conducted yet. To address this gap, this study was undertaken to explore the practices of the semester system implemented in higher education institutions in Nepal.

Methods and Procedures

This study employed both qualitative and quantitative (i.e., a mixed-methods) approach. It began with a quantitative survey to gather numerical data, followed by a qualitative narrative inquiry. This study aimed to investigate the practices of implementing the semester system at VU. An explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach was selected to study the practices and personal experiences of university-level teachers. The target population comprised all faculty members from five graduate schools at VU: Education, Humanities and Social Sciences, Engineering, Management, and Science and Technology. Forty-three faculty members were selected for the survey using simple random sampling, and seven of them were chosen for in-depth interviews purposively.

The researcher developed a structured questionnaire for faculty members that included both closed-ended and open-ended questions. The closed-ended questions helped quantitative analysis, while the open-ended questions enabled participants to share their experiences and perceptions regarding the semester system. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven purposively selected faculty members to gather their personal insights and "lived experiences" regarding practices in teaching within the semester system. Data collection was done in two phases: first, Google Forms were sent to the faculty members via email; second, in-depth interviews

were conducted with seven faculty members to confirm and expand on the survey results. These interviews were conducted with participants' consent via Zoom and transcribed verbatim for analysis and interpretation.

The survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (percentages and frequencies) to identify numerical information. Moreover, qualitative data were coded thematically, following the framework of Braun and Clarke (2006) for thematic analysis. Initially, several codes were selected from the interview transcripts, and they were later merged into five themes. Participant validation (member checking) was used to ensure credibility, asking the respondents to review and confirm the accuracy of their recorded responses. The study maintained ethical considerations by obtaining informed consent, maintaining participant confidentiality, and respecting diversity in terms of ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic background. The data were stored securely, and participant anonymity was maintained throughout the study. Pseudonyms have been used for the university name and participant names.

Results

This section presents findings from surveys and interviews conducted with 43 faculty members across the university's five graduate schools. The 43 participants, selected randomly, completed the survey, and seven of them were chosen for in-depth interviews about their experiences teaching in the semester system. Of the total participants surveyed, 40 were male, and three were female. Their teaching experience ranged from one year to over 10 years, with most having more than 10 years of teaching experience in the semester system. The results are presented both statistically and thematically, aligning with the study's research objectives.

Institutional Practices and Orientation

The faculty members' responses regarding their institutional and orientation practices are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Teachers' Information Regarding the Institutional Practices and Orientation

SN	Statements	Responses	
		Yes	No
1	The graduate school issues an academic calendar for the semester system that specifies the start date of the semester, holidays, termination date of the semester, midterm exams, and other relevant dates.	43 (100%)	

2	If you responded yes, the graduate school strictly follows the academic calendar.	24 (56.25%)	19 (43.75%)
3	A fixed quota or system is in place for on-campus student admissions.	24 (55.8%)	19 (44.2%)
4	The graduate school offers the Entrance Test (ET) as an optional or obligatory requirement.	42 (97.7%)	1
5	The graduate school runs an orientation program for the students at the beginning of the program/course.	35 (81.4%)	8 (18.6%)
6	You provide the program syllabus and the academic calendar on orientation day.	29 (67.4%)	14 (32.6%)

Table 1 shows that all teachers (100%) stated they provide a comprehensive academic calendar; however, only 56.25% of respondents confirmed they follow it strictly. Approximately all graduate schools (97.7%) used an Entrance Test (ET) for student admission, and a similar percentage (97.7%) also employed a fixed quota or admission system. Moreover, most graduate schools (81.4%) offered orientation programs for new students; however, a significant minority (32.6%) did not take this opportunity to distribute the syllabus. This highlights a gap in standardizing the immediate sharing of essential course documentation with students.

Curriculum Relevance and Quality

The faculty members were asked for their opinions on the curriculum's relevance and quality, and their responses are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2

Teachers' Views Regarding Curriculum Relevance and its Quality

SN	Statements	Responses	
		Yes	No
1	The curriculum is relevant, up-to-date, and market-based.	22 (51.2%)	21 (48.8%)
2	The objectives in the curriculum are SMART.	27 (62.8%)	16 (37.2%)
3	The curriculum's contents help achieve the set objectives.	34 (79.1%)	9 (20.9%)
4	You are free to structure the teaching courses to meet the course objectives.	29 (67.4%)	14 (32.6%)
5	The curriculum is interdisciplinary in nature.	32 (74.4%)	11 (25.6%)

Table 2 shows that most respondents agreed that curriculum objectives are SMART (62.8%) and that the content effectively achieves these goals (79.1%), indicating strong internal consistency. Nevertheless, slightly more than half of the respondents (51.2%) reported that the curriculum was relevant, timely, and market-driven, with nearly an equal number disagreeing. Moreover, about three-quarters (74.4%) reported that the curriculum is interdisciplinary, with an integrated learning focus. Furthermore, a majority of respondents (67.4%) expressed having the autonomy to design courses that meet their objectives, demonstrating widespread pedagogical freedom in course delivery.

Binod (pseudonym) shared his experience of applying his strategies for managing issues related to the curriculum from his perspective as:

> When prescribed textbooks and reference materials are not available in the library or on the market, I use the Internet, such as Google and Google Scholar, to search for research articles, books, research reports, PowerPoint slides, and other relevant resources for my courses. While teaching in the classroom, I utilise the latest research articles, books, and reports to provide students with up-to-date knowledge. I make every effort to incorporate current, relevant, and practical content into my teaching.

Similarly, Shyam (pseudonym) shared his strategy as follows:

> I prepare a detailed course outline to revise the syllabi and incorporate modern teaching and learning resources to support students' education. My focus is consistently on imparting the latest knowledge, skills, and attitudes to students. To support their learning, I prepare class lectures, PowerPoint slides, and handouts, and sometimes compile course materials for students. I also utilise locally available resources for my teaching.

Teaching Methods and Resources

The respondents were asked about the teaching methods and classroom resources they used in the semester system. Their responses are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3

Teachers' Responses Regarding Teaching Methods and Resources

SN	Statements	Responses	
		Yes	No
1	You prepare the course session plans before a semester begins.	27 (62.8%)	16 (37.2%)

2	Your graduate school determines the appropriate teaching and learning methods for the course.	18 (41.9%)	25 (58.1%)
3	You use interactive lectures and discussions, programmed learning, team teaching, assignments, and project work in the class.	43 (100%)	0
4	You actively involve all the students in class discussions.	35 (81.4%)	8 (18.6%)
5	You use authentic materials in the class.	34 (79.1%)	9 (20.9%)
6	You provide students with reading materials, such as sufficient and up-to-date books, articles, and class notes.	36 (83.7%)	7 (16.3%)

Table 3 shows that all respondents (100%) supported the use of diverse, interactive teaching strategies, including project work and team teaching, and were firmly committed to active student participation (81.4%) in discussions and to the use of authentic materials (79.1%). Resource availability was also good, with 83.7% of respondents providing students with sufficient and current reading materials. However, while a majority of respondents (62.8%) planned their sessions before the semester began, more than a third did not. Most faculty members (58.1%) reported that the choice of specific teaching methods was not mandated by the campus, indicating a high level of individual autonomy in teaching.

In this context, Ram (pseudonym) shared his experience with using teaching-learning materials in his teaching as follows:

> In addition to traditional instructional materials, I incorporate a variety of teaching resources, such as laptops, multimedia projectors, audiovisual tools, documentaries, and case studies. My teaching approach focuses on combining these tools to enhance the learning experience and address students' diverse needs, abilities, and learning styles.

Despite these challenges, several issues were identified, including a shortage of multimedia projectors, unreliable internet connections, frequent power outages, and limited access to library reading materials. About 27.9% of faculty members reported not using audiovisual materials at all due to these problems.

Students' Regularity and Adaptation of ICT Tools

The faculty members were surveyed about their students' consistency and use of ICT tools in the classroom. Their responses are presented in Table 4.

Table 4

Students' Regularity and Incorporation of ICT Tools

SN	Statements	Responses	
		Yes	No
1	Students attend class regularly.	19 (45.2%)	23 (54.8%)
2	Students must maintain an attendance rate of at least 80% for the entire semester.	25 (58.1%)	18 (41.9%)
3	Students come to class prepared for the topic.	25 (58.1%)	18 (41.9%)
4	Classes are run regularly throughout the semester.	33 (76.7%)	10 (23.3%)
5	You assign presentations and fieldwork to the students as part of assignments.	42 (97.7%)	1
6	You provide any rubrics or instructions along with the presentations or fieldwork assignments to the students.	36 (83.7%)	7 (16.3%)
7	Students submit their assignments to you before the deadline.	27 (62.8%)	16 (37.2%)
8	You use students' diverse social, cultural, regional, etc., backgrounds as examples in class.	36 (83.7%)	7 (16.3%)
9	You establish the link between teaching and research in your class.	40 (93%)	3 (7%)
10.	You incorporate ICT tools, such as email, the Internet, Google Meet, and Zoom, into your class.	40 (93%)	3 (7%)

Table 4 shows that most respondents (54.8%) indicated that their students do not attend classes regularly, despite 58.1% confirming a mandatory attendance requirement of 80%. Student preparation for the topic they would study that day was somewhat more positive, with 58.1% of faculty agreeing. Although teaching was consistent, 76.7% reported that classes are held regularly throughout the semester. The surveyed teachers demonstrated a strong commitment to active student learning, with 97.7% assigning presentations and fieldwork and 83.7% providing rubrics or instructions for these tasks. They reported using ICT tools (93%) and integrating teaching with research (93%). Moreover, teachers promoted inclusive teaching by using students' diverse social, cultural, and regional backgrounds as examples (83.7%). Student assignment completion was moderate, with 62.8% submitting on time.

Interviews with faculty members reveal that they faced challenges related to technical infrastructure, technological skills, resource availability, and student engagement in using ICT tools. They stated that unreliable power supply and internet access, a lack of gadgets such as projectors, mobiles, and laptops, and limited ICT skills among students and teachers. Teachers mainly relied on themselves using personal data/gadgets, participated in workshops, engaged in self-learning, and requested support from colleagues and trainers. Additionally, implementing the semester system faced challenges such as high student irregularity and absenteeism, academic dishonesty, time constraints due to lengthy syllabi, and inadequate infrastructure and administrative support. Teachers typically utilise a combination of assignments/ projects, presentations, and various examinations/tests for assessment, with a strong focus on providing constructive feedback. However, continuous assessment was not widely practiced. Shyam (pseudonym) said he tried to solve ICT-related problems in his teaching from his side:

> I use an alternative power source and mobile data for the Internet to conduct online classes from home. When I encounter issues with ICT tools, I consult an IT expert. Sometimes, I ask my colleagues and students for help. I also try to find solutions through Google search and YouTube. Additionally, I search for and download teaching materials whenever I have Internet access, whether at home or elsewhere.

Assessment Practices

The teachers were asked about the assessment practices they used in their classes, and their responses are shown in Table 5.

Table 5

Students' Assessment Practices

SN	Statements	Responses	
		Yes	No
1	You assess the students continuously.	39 (90.7%)	4 (9.3%)
2	You provide any constructive feedback on the students' performance.	41 (95.3%)	2 (4.65%)
3	You provide the question bank to the students.	23 (53.5%)	20 (46.5%)

Table 5 shows that most respondents (90.7%) reported continuously assessing students, indicating widespread use of ongoing assessment methods throughout the semester. As a result, a continuous assessment was strongly supported by the provision of constructive feedback, reported by an even higher percentage of faculty at 95.3%.

This suggests that assessment is primarily used for learning improvement and guidance, rather than solely as a final measure. However, the practice of providing a question bank to students is with a slight majority (53.5%) doing so, indicating that graduate schools or individual faculty members have not yet reached a consensus on the usefulness or appropriateness of giving students such pre-exposure to potential exam content.

Regarding the problem faced while assessing students in the semester system, Hari (pseudonym) expressed that:

> One major challenge I face when evaluating students is the submission of late assignments. Some students miss the assignment submission deadline. Often, I have to follow up with them repeatedly before they submit their assignments. Late assignment submission is a significant problem.

Teachers' Professional Development

The teachers were asked about their professional development programs, and their responses are shown in Table 6.

Table 6

Teachers' Professional Development

SN	Statements	Responses	
		Yes	No
1	You have received professional development training in your subject.	18 (41.9%)	25 (58.1%)
2	You received training related to teaching and assessing students in the semester system.	21 (48.8%)	22 (51.2%)
3	If yes, it helps you to teach and evaluate students in the semester system.	16 (74.4%)	5 (25.6%)

Table 6 indicates that a majority of respondents have not received any professional development training from their institutions. Specifically, 58.1% reported never having received professional development training related to their subject matter. In comparison, slightly more than half (51.2%) have not received training related to teaching and assessing students within the semester system. This shows a significant gap in professional enhancement programs. However, among the group of teachers who received training, a strong agreement emerged regarding its usefulness: 74.4% stated that the training was beneficial for teaching and assessing students in the semester system, highlighting the perceived value and positive effects of such initiatives when implemented.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that both structural and pedagogical issues hinder the effective implementation of the semester system at VU. Challenges such as a lack of strict follow-up on academic schedules and inadequate infrastructure align with prevalent themes identified in higher education transitions in Nepalese institutions.

The study's findings reveal that no strict adherence to academic calendars poses a significant challenge, frequently hindering the timely delivery of teaching and assessments. Sah (2020) agrees that the effort to maintain a strict academic calendar, coupled with the resulting disruption of teaching schedules, frequently undermines the time-sensitive nature of semester-based programs, a situation attributed to political instability and administrative delays in Nepal. The semester system requires 'temporal discipline,' in contrast to the annual system; this study demonstrates that inadequate time management and student irregularity undermine the continuity of learning. This aligns with Poudel's (2021) assertion that the transition to semesters in emerging contexts is predominantly 'structural rather than functional,' with the academic calendar being theoretical yet infrequently adhered to in practice.

The practical implementation of semester systems is hindered by limited resources, including inadequate ICT facilities and unreliable internet access, which hinder the integration of technology into teaching and learning. Physical constraints challenge the implementation of interactive, student-centered teaching, supporting Attard et al.'s (2010) claim that student-centered learning requires flexible conditions, which are often unattainable in traditional, overcrowded classrooms. Furthermore, the lack of reliable internet and library resources aligns with the "digital gap" described by Ghimire (2022), in which inadequate technological integration prevents faculty from moving beyond traditional lecture-based methods.

The study's findings suggest that teachers are not adequately prepared for the teaching methods and tests specific to each semester. This aligns with Lohani's (2019) study, which indicates that many teachers in Nepal still rely on summative evaluation models characteristic of the annual system, rather than the continuous, formative assessments essential for an effective semester system. Without targeted faculty development programs, the 'washback effect' of traditional exams continues to shape the classroom environment, regardless of the administrative structure.

Conclusion

This study examined the implementation practices of the semester system at Valley University in Nepal from the perspectives of faculty members. The findings indicate that, although they consider the semester system modern, practical, and student-centered, its full potential remains unrealized due to numerous persistent challenges. In

the effective implementation of the semester system, the significant challenges include inconsistent adherence to academic calendars, irregular student attendance, outdated or insufficient teaching and learning resources, limited ICT infrastructure, and gaps in faculty preparedness for semester-based teaching and assessment. Although the curriculum is relevant and better aligned with labor market needs, it could benefit from more practical components, greater integration of indigenous knowledge, and stronger interdisciplinary links. Issues regarding academic honesty and low participation in internal assessments hinder the practical evaluation, despite the benefits of continuous assessment.

Overall, the semester system at VU has excellent potential for enhancing educational quality in the area where the university is located. However, its success depends on systemic reforms, targeted resource allocation, and specific capacity-building programs for both faculty members and students. By addressing the above-mentioned challenges, VU and similar institutions in developing regions can better realize the semester system's intended benefits—such as encouraging active learning, enhancing academic standards, and aligning higher education with the needs of a rapidly changing global knowledge economy. After adopting a semester system and reforming assessment procedures to enhance teaching and pedagogy, VU will highlight the importance of ongoing infrastructure investment and professional development.

The study's findings will help university authorities refine their current practices to make them more effective and reliable, aligning with twenty-first-century global educational trends. Despite challenges about curriculum implementation, the results are valuable to all stakeholders involved in the semester system. This supports policymakers in developing effective educational policies. It also assists curriculum experts in addressing problems related to curriculum design, teaching, learning activities, and assessment methods, thereby enhancing their efficiency, reliability, and consistency. As a result, the insights from this study can inform the reorganization of the semester system to address its limitations and challenges.

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