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Exploring Edupreneurship: A Qualitative Study of Private Colleges in Nepal

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Abstract:

This study explores how Nepali private colleges adopt edupreneurial practices. These new approaches are combining responsiveness to the market with their core academic missions. Institutional theory and entrepreneurial orientation offer a framework for examining the interplay between legitimacy and innovation in institutional practices. This provides insight into how competition and survival goals shape the strategic choices. This qualitative study thematically analyzed the collected data through online responses from the institutional leaders (n_1 = 5), faculty members (n_2 = 5), and senior students (n_3 = 7). The key insights highlight that Nepali private colleges mainly adopt edupreneurial strategies in several areas. They focus on strengthening their branding efforts, ensure regulatory compliance, integrate value-added programs and technology. Moreover, they work on expansion of faculty responsibilities, and focusing on career readiness. These strategies are driven not only by commercial success but also by the need for institutions to adapt to a changing environment, sustainability, and social aspects. As a result, edupreneurship emerges as a strategic response to institutional expectations, market pressures, and legitimacy concerns.

Keywords: *edupreneurship, Nepali higher education, institutional theory, entrepreneurial orientation*

1. Introduction:

Private colleges in Nepal have experienced a revolutionary change over the decades. They constitute more than half of Nepal's registered colleges and account for nearly one-third of students enrolled in higher education (UGC, 2025). This growth has profoundly redefined their institutional identity. Previously, the mission statements of colleges often focused on values such as literacy and discipline; however, they now emphasize innovation, global readiness, and leadership. This transformation reflects a broader shift in higher education toward market-oriented institutional practices. This blend of academic goals and market-driven strategies is known as educational entrepreneurship or edupreneurship. This trend is observable in how different universities around the world are working together and adopting new curricula. These developments reflect deliberate edupreneurial strategies aimed at securing competitive advantage within an increasingly marketized higher education environment.

However, there are key issues related to the market-oriented strategies adopted to achieve a balance between the need to establish trust and credibility within the particular market environment (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). It is necessary to distinguish between entrepreneurial efforts that genuinely promote learning and those that mainly aim to enhance the institution's image (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996). Despite the growth of the private sector, qualitative studies on how higher education institutions (HEIs) manage their pressures to conform to the conflicting demands of academic integrity and market survival are limited. Thus, this study aimed to explore how private colleges in Nepal are engaging in edupreneurial practices from the institutional and entrepreneurial lenses. In this regard, Institutional Theory and Entrepreneurial Orientation (EO) serve as the main framework for this study. These approaches provide an interpretive context in which to understand the dynamic link between innovation and legitimacy. Institutional theory explains how an institution responds to external influences to establish its legitimacy and EO explains how an institution can establish market leadership. This study looks at the balance where these two forces meet because colleges must follow regulators while trying to be different from their competitors.

DiMaggio and Powell (1983) state that institutions adopt different practices not just for efficiency but also to appear credible to regulators, parents, and peer institutions. This process is reflected in Nepal through three forms of isomorphism. 'Coercive isomorphism' happens when organizations must follow formal rules. Private colleges in Nepal follow the guidelines set by national agencies including the University Grants Commission (UGC), and their affiliated universities (UGC, 2025). Many institutions often imitate successful market leaders through 'mimetic isomorphism'. For instance, a college in Pokhara might copy a STEM-focused approach from Kathmandu University to reduce innovation costs and the risk of failure. Furthermore, 'normative isomorphism' refers to professional standards, in which the qualifications and norms of the faculty and the codes of practice are the same in most institutions, resulting in uniformity. In the Nepali higher education system, the need to maintain legitimacy can be met through compliance, imitation, and professional norms. These pressures result in the implementation of changes that are likely to prioritize uniformity over innovation unless the institution adopts an entrepreneurial mindset.

Edupreneurship is often defined as a paradigm shift in education that reflects the coordination of social purpose with market-centric strategies (Lehmann et al., 2024). This is noticeable in the Asian context through strategies like forming affiliations with foreign universities, implementing their global or glocalized courses, and investing in modern facilities. In this regard, EO covers proactiveness, competitive aggressiveness, autonomy, innovation, and risk-taking (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996). Proactiveness is seen in anticipating student needs ahead of other institutions, such as by providing artificial intelligence (AI)-focused programs. Competitive aggressiveness is reflected in efforts to outperform rivals in branding and attracting talent. Faculty teams themselves can demonstrate autonomy in the development of new courses and/or lesson plans. The preparedness of the universities to embrace new opportunities like the new courses, technologies, and programs such as Bachelor of Technology in Artificial Intelligence (BTech AI) can be viewed as attributes of innovation and risk taking.

The blend of these theories suggests that edupreneurship in Nepal is a strategic way to respond to institutional pressures. EO shapes the edupreneurial strategies, and colleges are encouraged to stand out in their own way while still following the formal rules required to comply for their survival. This establishes the way in which their entrepreneurship can be linked to their institutional goals. In the Nepali context, these trends have been noticed in the cities, where the competition between private colleges is very high. In such cases, the pressures on the institutions are to maintain academic standards and to compete for students, and the need to adapt and innovate, i.e., to become entrepreneurial, is a necessity for their survival and growth.

2. Materials and Methods:

A qualitative approach was adopted in this study to effectively explore less-studied real-world phenomena by capturing participants' perspectives in such concerns (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Online responses were selected to allow participants greater flexibility, anonymity, and reflection when discussing institutional practices. It gave insights into how three key stakeholder groups: leaders, faculty, and students, respond to market pressures while upholding their educational values. Data were collected from open-ended Google Forms while exploring edupreneurship in private colleges. Data collection continued until responses began to show repetitive thematic patterns and no major new insights emerged. Participants were purposefully selected from five private colleges in Kathmandu that offer similar professional programs and operate under comparable regulatory conditions.

These participants were invited via email and messaging platforms, along with a customized Google Form link for each group to guarantee accessibility and asynchronous responses and facilitate convenience. In this context, institutional leaders ($n_1 = 5$), faculty members ($n_2 = 5$), and senior students ($n_3 = 7$), a total of 17 participants submitted their responses. Then, the data were thematically analyzed using the six-step process proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The process began with getting to know the data, reading the responses multiple times, and creating codes before finally creating larger patterns and identifying potential themes. The process was done manually to remain intimately connected to the data. In this regard, data from different participants' perspectives make the results more reliable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, as cited in Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Moreover, participants were informed about the purpose of this study. They were asked to check a box to give their informed consent before completing their online forms. Participants were assigned pseudonyms (e.g., A1 for administrator, F1 for faculty member, and S1 for student) to maintain confidentiality. This qualitative study was limited to the participants' self-reported experiences.

3. Results and Discussion:

Brand Identity and Differentiation

Colleges have found ways to stand out beyond normal education. This enables them to strategically differentiate themselves. In this context, some administrators (A1, A2, A3) focus on affordability, innovation, or engineering, while others (A4, A5) emphasize community engagement as part of a curriculum designed to provide market-relevant education at competitive prices. Additionally, faculty members (F1, F2) highlight their long-term connections to collaboration, project work, and innovative practices. Faculty members, F3 and F4 mention global connections and opportunities offered by their colleges to students. Some students (S2, S3, S4) indicate that collaboration and transformation are their institutions' main strategies. Others (S3, S5) are influenced by the college's reputation and opinions of family, friends, and social circles or media. However, S1, S6, and S7 report that their colleges' facilities are inferior to what had been promoted during recruitment and marketing. This suggests a decoupling between the edupreneurial image presented by the leadership and the actual student experience on campus. Therefore, colleges are redefining their legitimacy by combining these market values with their academic traditions to establish a distinct position in the competitive education market.

Market Intelligence and Competitor Monitoring

Colleges engage in entrepreneurial proactiveness by monitoring their competitors, a process that normally culminates in mimetic isomorphism. This process often leads institutions to copy the strategies of successful rivals to maintain competitive parity. Administrators (A1, A2, A3) agree that they monitor their competitors to ensure innovation in their academic offerings through adaptation and restructuring. Another leader (A4) adds that there is a mission statement that they have to follow, but they have to survey their competitors constantly. F1 and F4 faculty members agree that they have to incorporate innovation and be ready to compete globally through their teachings. Student feedback from S2, S3, S4, and S5 indicates that basic brand elements are well incorporated in their presentations and events. However, some students (S6, S7) feel that some sessions are too theoretical. This process is necessary in order to ensure that colleges respond to market dynamics.

Affiliations and Formal Compliance

Institutional legitimacy is often reinforced through isomorphic pressures. Administrators A1, A2, and A4 consider affiliations to be an essential indicator of whether the students and parents trust the institution. This represents an important balance of the push for innovation and the need to comply with national policy. Affiliation with top institutions is a prerequisite for gaining global recognition and acts as a form of coercive isomorphism where the colleges must follow strict academic rules to remain legitimate. From the faculty point of view (F5), these standardized norms are the parameters by which the academic boundaries are set; even within the entrepreneurial framework, the board exams were strictly governed by the university guidelines. From the students' (S3, S5, S7) perspective, these affiliations create a sense of belonging and confidence, which indicates that the legitimacy of the qualification is inextricably linked to the reputation of the parent university. However, some other students (S1, S7) felt that their enrollment decisions were based on more pragmatic factors.

Trust-Building and Quality Assurance

Colleges are increasingly moving beyond the boundaries of institutional compliance to establish professionalism through quality assurance. Administrators (A1, A2) claim that building trust is a product of institutional transparency, often showcased through the achievement of ISO certification. Another administrator (A4) indicates that institutional legitimacy is further demonstrated through the alignment between the curriculum and community engagement. Although faculty (F2) appreciate a level of autonomy in the curriculum, another faculty member (F5) indicates that the standardized examinations potentially stifle the creativity these institutions aim to foster. This creates a tension between the need for institutional legitimacy and the entrepreneurial goal of innovation. From the student point of view, although the legitimacy of the qualification is valued for its link to future employability (S3, S5, S7), there is a recognition that institutions must balance these coercive forces with the need to be entrepreneurial.

Value-Added Skills and Programs

Private colleges are broadening their traditional curriculum to stay competitive while still complying with regulations. Administrators (A1, A3, A4, A5) agree that value-added skills and programs are essential for staying competitive. This is particularly true for non-credit courses and idea incubators. This is crucial for the skill sets of the students and the overall market perception of the college. Some of the faculty members (F1, F3, F4) support these new initiatives through peer learning and data analytics sessions. Students S3, S4, and S7 all agree that these new initiatives have made a significant impact. Although some logistical issues were reported, high-level mentoring sessions and community-building events were highly valued.

Teaching Methods and Technology Integration

The shift towards an edupreneurial model is an integration of technology and collaborative learning. Administrators (A4, A5) shared the lab-studio idea that provides an opportunity for students to solve global issues through collaborative networks. Faculty members (F2, F3, F4, and F5) describe this as a shift toward more practice-oriented learning experiences. In addition, students (S1, S3, S5, and S6) report the extensive use of technology within the classroom. Although a few students express concern over changing mindsets to integrate technology and global competence, the data showcase a very strong trend to embrace new technologies to create a better learning experience in colleges.

Employability and Market Relevance

Colleges are defining their success in terms of what students achieve once they graduate. They are ensuring their expected outcomes align with what their stakeholders desire. The college administrators (A2, A3, A4) claim to be preparing students to meet the needs of the job market by creating partnerships, internships, and training sessions. However, faculty member (F2) concurs with this market-oriented strategy in terms of its ability to increase student engagement. However, students express this concern in their own words. In the process, there is a fear that responding to market needs may compromise academic integrity, a tension between edupreneurial goals and institutional norms. Some students (S3, S4) think that internships give them a competitive edge while others (S5, S7) think that these opportunities are too limited. The key to a college's legitimacy is striking a balance between what parents want their children to achieve in their future careers and what constitutes a legitimate education.

Expanded Faculty Roles

The role of faculty members is changing from traditional lecturers to proactive and versatile mentors in entrepreneurial learning. In this regard, faculty members (F1, F2, F3) present themselves as career coaches who oversee internship programs and idea incubations. Students (S2, S3, S6) point to this change in faculty roles and the campus environment as factors that influence their educational experience. However, administrators (A5) and faculty members (F4) express concerns about students' pursuit of the best job opportunities or the decision to study abroad being the primary issues within the edupreneurial system. This shifts the role of the faculty to support the evolving institutional priorities associated with edupreneurship.

Student Perspectives on Career Readiness

It is worth noting that the effectiveness of the concept of edupreneurship is largely dependent on the preparedness of students to face the real job world after their graduation. For instance, there are students who are satisfied with the college environment and the professional ambiance that is currently in place, as in the cases of S2 and S6. Some students, such as S3, identified gaps between institutional branding and actual facilities provided. Moreover, there are also students who share a common notion that was expressed by some participants (S3, S4, S7 and F5) that there is a need to establish closer connections with industries and to provide smaller classes with better incubation services. In addition, there is also the fact that the university brand itself is huge (S1), to the point that it overshadows the college brand in terms of perceived value of the experience that it provides to its students. Overall, this finding suggests that in order to be successful in edupreneurship in the context of private colleges, there is a need to provide evidence of practical skills-building in response to the demands of the market.

Discussion

Edupreneurship is shaped by the dynamic interaction between innovation and legitimacy. Hence, institutions should employ different marketing approaches to influence students' decision to enroll. Institutional theory explains how colleges seek legitimacy through their association with top universities, compliance with the agencies like National Examinations Board (NEB) or through the adoption of international standards such as ISO certification (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Joo & Halx, 2011). These strategies are not optional for institutional survival; they are essential. In addition, EO stresses the fact that institutions aim at innovativeness, proactiveness and competitive strength in areas such as branding, diversification of programs and improvement of employability (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996). These insights show that curriculum innovation is often a result of mimetic isomorphism, where colleges monitor and copy successful rivals to avoid being left behind in the market. This shows the link between legitimacy and edupreneurship. Higher education institutions use marketing mix activities to strategically position their programs and attract students (Khanal, 2025). Other indicators of EO qualities are creativity and risk-taking like value-added programs, competence-based training and industry partnerships (Lam et al., 2024). However, they are primarily aimed at improving the existing curriculum to secure approval from both the government and parents.

However, this research also reveals a significant issue within the edupreneurial rhetoric and its actual implementation. While educational institutions focus on building their own brand to promote educational quality, there exist legitimacy issues based on students' views (S1, S6, S7). Their feedback suggests a gap between the entrepreneurial rhetoric of the leadership and the actual quality of facilities. This decoupling raises the question whether edupreneurship in Nepal has become a performance rather than a real model in private colleges. The focus on employability reflects the way in which market success legitimizes entrepreneurial risks and signals the institutional quality to the stakeholders. These dynamics indicate that the entrepreneurial efforts in Nepal are heavily dependent on legitimacy and cannot function without it. The study shows a continuing tension between the colleges' desire to be excellent through innovation and a need to be academically compliant. If market readiness is overemphasized, higher education risks becoming short-term job preparation, sacrificing broader aims such as civic engagement and critical thinking. Such a focus on employability threatens to undermine the social mission of universities.

This is consistent with the idea that entrepreneurial universities should focus more on social and environmental impacts, not just economic gains (Lehmann et al., 2024). Also, the active participation of students, faculty and staff in the educational system has a great impact on the overall enrollment process and the edupreneurial culture. This also raises the issue that edupreneurial development may actually widen gaps by favoring those educational institutions, faculty, and students that have the means to be legitimate. This duality brings great opportunities and challenges for the Nepali higher education system to adopt the entrepreneurial model. This study contributes to the growing literature on edupreneurship in urban colleges by showing how entrepreneurial practices in higher education are influenced by market competition and institutional legitimacy pressures.

4. Conclusion:

The findings of this study carry important practical and policy implications for Nepali private higher education institutions and regulatory agencies. The University Grants Commission (UGC) and other agencies should develop some frameworks to guide and audit edupreneurship in Nepal. This should not be a cosmetic exercise but involve a genuine assessment of students' learning outcomes by incorporating incubation spaces and value-added skills. There should be a focus on academics at colleges by moving away from flashy surface-level promotion. Edupreneurs should adopt more substantive and student-centered engagement programs that cater to students' needs. They should incorporate digitalization and well-being. This balance would require investments in teacher training and stakeholder engagement to ensure the effective implementation of new ideas.

From a policy point of view, Nepali higher education policy should be framed in a way that allows for flexibility and space for innovation without compromising equity or reducing innovation to procedural compliance. This policy should ensure the academic legitimacy of edupreneurship and actual financial support to students from disadvantaged economic groups. There should be a focus on both social and economic impacts. Future research should adopt comparative, longitudinal, and quantitative approaches to assess the viability of the policy to understand its relation to legitimacy and edupreneurship. Nepali edupreneurship should be viewed as a hybrid construct where there is a balance between entrepreneurial drive and academic legitimacy. This balance should be leveraged to ensure the success of innovation and thereby strengthen legitimacy.

Employability should be viewed as an important indicator of institutional legitimacy. Integrity and inclusiveness should be the key drivers to ensure that edupreneurship adds positively to human capital development in Nepal without creating new gaps in society.

Overall, this study indicates that private colleges strategically integrate branding, employability initiatives, technology integration, value-added programs, and industry-oriented practices to remain competitive in a marketized higher education environment. At the same time, the study reveals an ongoing tension between entrepreneurial innovation and academic legitimacy. While colleges seek market relevance and institutional survival, concerns related to academic quality, inclusiveness, and institutional credibility remain important challenges. Edupreneurship in Nepal therefore emerges as a hybrid construct that balances entrepreneurial drive with institutional legitimacy.

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The author declares that there are no financial or non-financial competing interests related to this work.

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