

Semester System in Tribhuvan University: Perception of Students and Teachers

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Abstract

This case study reveals the current implementation of the semester system at Tribhuvan Multiple Campus (TMC), Palpa, through the stakeholders' perceptions to identify the strengths and weaknesses. The research used a qualitative case study methodology, and data were collected through in-depth interviews with two purposively selected participants (one a 4th-semester student and the other a teacher from the education faculty). The data were analyzed using a thematic approach. The findings reveal that despite the Tribhuvan University (TU)'s ambitious program to implement the semester system, the practical implementation, especially in the education faculty, is disappointing. The inherent norms of the semester system, such as active participation of students in terms of attendance, pedagogical activities, formative as well as continuous mode of evaluation, and accountable cum facilitator roles of the teacher, have all faced challenges to meet the expected outcomes. Based on the study's findings, the semester system at TU outside the valley should be restructured to adopt an online-blended modality. Furthermore, to increase the effectiveness of the program, university leadership and its agencies need to make policy reforms that incorporate practical feedback from stakeholders to develop and adapt sustainable systems.

Keywords: semester system, perception, higher education, implementation challenges, paradigm

Introduction

In Nepal, after the exit of the Rana regime in 2007 BS, several educational commissions were established to focus on designing initiatives for the proliferation of education across the country. The Framework and Design of Higher Education determine its Quality and Relevance. Tribhuvan University (TU), being the oldest and the largest, has attempted several systemic changes to incorporate more effective models of teaching. One of the significant changes has been the occasional adoption of the semester system. It has been seen to enhance academic rigor, Students' involvement, and Teaching Methods (Poudel, 2018). The National Education System Plan (NESP), 1971, advocated that for the higher education system to be more effective and workable, it should be based on the semester system. Although the theory looks good, the shift in the education system from the traditional Annual System to the Semester System has been met with great opposition and complexities, especially when it is to be implemented in a resource-deficient and diverse network of campuses.

The semester system, with its compacted academic terms, continuous evaluation, learner-centered pedagogy, and a rigid internal calendar, is expected to cultivate detailed learning and responsibility (Baral et al., 2019; Poudel, 2018). After TU's first unsuccessful attempt in the 1970s, TU introduced the semester system again at the master's level at TU's central campus in 2013 and then, subsequently, in 2017, initiated the roll-out of the semester system across the country (TU Semester System Operational Guideline, 2070). However, recent research indicates a policy implementation gap, particularly on campuses located beyond the urban areas of the Kathmandu Valley (Subedi, 2019; K.C. & Khadka, 2021).

Several recent studies (Baral et al., 2019; Dahal, 2018; Subedi, 2019) focus on challenges within Nepal's educational contexts, including poor physical and digital infrastructure, limited teacher training in interactive pedagogy, student absenteeism due to part-time employment, and a lack of effective continuous assessment. These challenges can be found in most developing countries that have instituted various educational reforms. Most of these countries face similar challenges of poor resource availability, limited institutional capacity, and lack of readiness among various stakeholders. Stakeholders' commitment to the pedagogical shift and the availability of resources, regardless of how well the policy is designed.

This case study on Tribhuvan University aims to evaluate the implementation of the semester system in TMC, Palpa, and to offer recommendations to improve the semester system of Tribhuvan University based on the perceptions of the students and faculty. It hopes to identify the advantages and disadvantages of the semester system and provide constructive criticism to refine the education system.

Statement of the Problem

After almost 10 years of its introduction at the Master's level, TU's semester system, with its theoretical benefits, is crumbling with serious concerns, especially on campuses outside the resourced capital. Across the country, challenges such as decreased enrollment, absentee students, teachers' apathy towards reforming teaching practices, an overreliance on lecturing, ICT-related issues, and poor academic results are on the rise (K.C. & Khadka, 2021; Subedi, 2019). After the restoration of democracy in 2007 BS and the establishment of several education commissions, it looks like the reform efforts have reached an impasse and risk reverting to the previous inefficient practices.

TMC, Palpa is one of the constituent campuses where these challenges are evident. The resources and infrastructure available to TMC, Palpa, and other similar campuses are limited. Upgrading and accessing digital resources is time-consuming, and faculty members often lack the skills needed to teach continuously and interactively. When coupled with a lack of the necessary resources, a half-hearted attempt at a semester system creates stakeholder frustration, counteracting the intended objective of improving quality. For these reasons, the "ground reality" must be explored from the eyes of the involved to gain a thorough understanding of the situation. This study aims to understand the perceptions of the students and faculty of TMC to find the reasons for

the failures and to offer solutions to improve the practicability and effectiveness of the semester system on rural campuses.

Significance of the Study

Educational methods and teaching strategies are the most vital components of any educational system. This study reflects a major policy within TU. For TMC administration and TU authorities, the insights provide a firsthand account of what is required to address the gaps in policy, resource distribution, or training. For the faculty and the students, the study presents common hurdles and pathways for possible adjustments. It offers a qualitative study of educational reforms in Nepal's limited-resource situation. It is comparable to the higher education situation of many countries worldwide. By concentrating on perception, it points out the human and contextual aspects that can enable or disable educational systems and the reforms therein. In addition, the findings should be particularly beneficial for the stakeholders in the TMC administration and TU to establish a more efficient and viable semester system.

Delimitations of the Study

This study is solely based on TMC in Palpa. It is a qualitative case study. For this study, data have been collected through detailed interviews from a small, purposefully sampled group within the Education Faculty at TMC. The findings, while in-depth, are not intended for broad statistical generalization but for analytical insight into a specific context.

Literature Review

The major debate within higher education between annual and semester systems is primarily a discussion regarding pedagogy and student engagement. The semester system is said to promote continuous learning, decrease student procrastination, increase course variety, and allow for greater use of formative assessment techniques (Paudel, 2018). However, its successful implementation depends on a number of factors, including a full-time or highly dedicated student body and teaching faculty skilled in interactive and student-centered teaching, a well-developed library and IT infrastructure, and strict observance of the academic calendar (Baral et al., 2019; De Wit & Altbach, 2021).

Regarding the semester system in TU, studies conducted after 2017 present a challenging picture. Baral et al. (2019) reported that, even though students thought the aim of the semester system was to improve the quality of education, the implementation faced a number of obstacles, including large class sizes, a dominant lecturing style, and a lack of resources. Additionally, Subedi (2019) reported that teachers and students in TU had a generally positive attitude towards the curriculum and the learning environment, but noted a critical lack of ICT, learning resources, and extracurricular services. Finally, Dahal's (2018) case study of the Nepal Commerce Campus reported a generally positive attitude towards the campus, except for the physical infrastructure, which indicated that the problems may be discipline- and campus- location related.

Neupane (2023) used a qualitative phenomenological design in his study involving university EFL teachers and students at Tribhuvan Multiple Campus, Palpa. He states

that practical delivery and evaluation conditions constrain the implementation of the semester system. Course-completion deadlines were often missed by teachers, classroom resources and ICT were lacking, and students, who were job holders, showed irregular attendance. This resulted in low levels of active participation in teaching-learning activities.

Singh (2022) focused on MBS second-semester students across the TU constituent and affiliated campuses in the Kathmandu Valley. His study shows high irregularity among students and various factors - physical, social, and economic - that contribute to this irregularity, including employment and marital status. Singh (2022) found a strong positive correlation between attendance and academic performance (reported correlation $r = .873$) and, based on this, suggested enforcing a minimum attendance requirement (80%) to enhance the effectiveness of the program.

In a mixed-method study on semester-based programs at Mid-Western University, Khanal (2019) documented extensive irregular attendance (many students described their attendance as “sometimes” or “always” irregular) and identified numerous causes, including university/faculty, student, and home/community factors. Khanal (2019) found that attendance was positively correlated with academic achievement and noted the significance of attendance in evaluating the effectiveness of semester systems.

Chongbang (2014) compared the traditional annual system and the semester system in higher education in Nepal, focusing on student-centered learning, continuous internal assessment, and well-resourced classrooms. As a result of these system improvements, the semester system noted a significant increase in student pass rates in higher education.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, low-resource countries such as Nepal experienced worsening disparities in digital inequity based on unequal access to technology and digital literacy. This created a higher demand for the provision of digital or blended learning for Nepal’s educational institutions, as well as for the provision of flexible assessment practices. This was projected to improve educational equity in Nepal (Dawadi et al., 2024).

Systemic issues and a lack of faculty preparedness are not unique to Nepal. After studying public universities in Punjab, Pakistan, Pervaiz et al (2020) found that a lack of modern assessment skills, an overwhelming amount of non-teaching work, and the inability to cover the syllabus all contributed to difficulties in achieving equitable assessment within the semester systems. These issues are similar to concerns regarding faculty readiness in Nepal (K.C. & Khadka, 2021). These relatively similar environments point to systemic issues and a lack of faculty preparedness as significant contributors to the students’ lack of attendance and engagement, which are the issues this paper aims to address.

From the available literature, there appears to be a consensus that adopting an unmodified semester system from an ideal context, a well-resourced setting, to constituent campuses in Nepal, is likely to produce a significant “implementation gap”.

This research attempts to address the existing academic gap on this issue based on the specific, rural campus context in Nepal, by providing a phenomenological account of the matter.

Methodology

Research Paradigm and Design

This study is placed within an interpretivist paradigm. The realities of the semester system are socially constructed from the experiences and interactions of the participants (Taylor & Medina, 2013). For a qualitative case study, it is necessary to obtain an in-depth understanding of the system's contextual details within its setting at TMC, Palpa (Yin, 2018).

Study Site and Participants

This study took place at Tribhuvan Multiple Campus in Palpa in 2022. Participants were purposefully selected to provide intelligent and robust cases. One of these participants was "Abtar Prasad" (pseudonym), a fourth-semester student in the M. Ed. Program, and "Ramhari Sharma" (pseudonym), a teacher in the Faculty of Education with 13 years of professional teaching experience. Of these 13 years, 5 years were spent teaching in a semester system.

Data Collection and Analysis

The main data were collected using semi-structured, in-depth interviews. These interviews were audio-recorded after participants provided prior informed consent. The researcher also kept field notes. Interviews were analyzed and transcribed verbatim. Qualitative content analysis was done to analyze the interviews. This followed the steps of data reduction, data display, and drawing of conclusions (Elo & Kyngas, 2008). Patterns were identified, and key themes were derived using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Ethical Considerations

All ethical protocols (informed consent, confidentiality – use of pseudonyms, no harm to participants, reciprocal benefits) were observed (Khanal, 2015). The principles of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability were used to assess the trustworthiness of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For authenticity, fair representation of the participants' voices was ensured.

Results and Discussion

Interviews were conducted with both the teacher and the student, addressing several issues. The audio was recorded and then transcribed for coding. Initial codes were grouped into sub-themes. Analysis of the teacher and student interviews resulted in three primary themes regarding their experiences of the semester system at TMC, Palpa. The three themes are described below.

The Semester System as an Aspirational but Misguided Model

The teacher and student considered the semester system as having some theoretical advantages. The student, Abtar Prasad (pseudonym), had some prior knowledge and some expectations of the system. He stated, *"I heard that a postgraduate degree is a highly demanded program that provides a suitable environment for effective teaching and learning."* Students appreciate the level of motivation and participation, and the

system of evaluating participants is used as a method of quality improvement and encourages participation from the students. The teacher, Ramhari Sharma (pseudonym), acknowledged the positive aspects of the semester system and cited several strengths, including *“advanced courses,” a “collaborative approach,” and the development of students who are “interactive, confident, and inquiry-driven.”* As described in the positive foundational perception, the positive aspects of the semester system cited by the teacher and the students are in line with other studies conducted regarding the perception and intention of the system (Baral et al., 2019; Subedi, 2019). The perception of the participants is in line with another study that was conducted in Nepal, which evaluated the semester system that is characterized by being student-centered with a system of continuous internal evaluations and a system that is resource intensive, and which resulted in a significant improvement in student pass rates in comparison with the traditional, annual system (Chongbang, 2014). There was a major gap experienced by teachers and students that conflicted with their perception of the system. The core dilemma of TMC’s implementation, captured by the same student, is, for instance, that *“What I have heard about the semester system cannot be experienced in reality.” ... We lack adequate textbooks... We hardly have any internet connection... This is the problem faced by me, who is attending regular classes, but you can imagine what the situation would be for the irregular students.*

This statement underscores a profound disconnect: the system's design presupposes conditions—full-time, resource-supported learning—that are largely absent on a rural campus like TMC, Palpa. The model, therefore, feels aspirational but fundamentally misaligned with the campus’s operational and socioeconomic constraints (K.C. & Khadka, 2021). The model is essentially misaligned with most rural campus operatives, and TMC is no exception.

Execution-Level Challenges

The semester system’s participants underscore the systemic nature of the multifaceted implementation challenges that are specific to the semester system at TMC Palpa. These challenges revolve around five major sub-systemic themes and create a systemic loop.

Chronic Student Absenteeism and Engagement Issues

An immediate and visible challenge to interactive teaching and learning, which is crucial to the semester model, is widespread absenteeism. This is reportedly the 'most prominent' challenge faced by teacher Ramhari Sharma. He said, *'If they are absent and do not take part in the activities, how do we teach them the knowledge and skills as per the objectives?'* Student participant Abtar Prasad confirmed how serious the problem is by stating, *'I was sometimes the only student in the whole class.'* Teacher Sharma attributed absenteeism to an array of complex socioeconomic factors, the most common of which are *a prevalent job-seeking trend among students, migration, marriage (mainly of female students), and applying for visas to other countries to study and work.* Neupane (2023) points out that the central problem in implementing the semester system in Nepal is *persistent student irregularity, which hinders the system from functioning in participatory teaching and learning.* In a TU-affiliated setting (Tribhuvan Multiple Campus, Palpa), the respondent teacher said that many students do

not attend class, and absenteeism is linked to students' job obligations (i.e., 'job holders'), which, in turn, adversely affects teaching and learning participation and activities.

The semester model typically maintains that for eligibility and meaningful continuous assessment, a minimum level of physical presence is required. As a practical matter, in situations in which a significant portion of the student population is unable to meet the requirement, the requirement itself becomes the primary implementation stressor. Neupane (2023) discusses how internal marks are directly related to attendance and participation, and notes the semester evaluation provision for 80% attendance, but also acknowledges that many students are still irregular, making it challenging to carry out the intended assessment and instruction. From the perspective of student irregularity, Khanal (2019) indicates that the semester model's requirement of near-continuous attendance, including the 80% rule for examination eligibility, directly contradicts widespread student irregularity, thus questioning the feasibility and integrity of implementing semester-based systems. When attendance is irregular, assessment practices become challenged and are contentious. The results of this study coincides with a study by the TU management faculty, where Singh (2022) found that irregularity among MBS students is high and is impacted by employment and marital status, and importantly, demonstrates a high positive correlation ($r = .873$) between attendance and academic performance, suggesting that to enhance the overall performance of the program, more stringent measures to ensure attendance at a minimum of 80% are necessary.

Students' absenteeism is an issue that crosses intra-TU programs and inter-university programs. It is evidenced in other Nepalese university settings; absenteeism is not an isolated phenomenon, but a wider structural issue. In Mid-Western University (semester-based curriculum), for instance, a large number of students reported irregular attendance, "sometimes" or "always," and institutional stakeholders suggested multiple contributing clusters: university-related conditions, student-related factors, home factors, and community factors. It suggests that attendance irregularity is a multi-causal issue beyond individual choice (Khanal, 2019).

Lack of Learning Resources and Poor Infrastructure

Absenteeism and disengagement are worsened by a critical shortage of basic learning resources. The shortage of learning materials affects both respondents of the study. Abtar Prasad said, *"There aren't many textbooks or reference books available. Since we do not have the internet, we can't search for the learning materials. We have to rely on the teacher's learning reflections."* This leaves students to rely on the teacher's notes to fill in the learning gap. This is entirely contrary to the resource-demanding, self-learning that the semester-based system expects. Teacher respondent Sharma confirmed this and noted that *"the absence of appropriate prescribed textbooks," "poor infrastructure," and "an IT-unfriendly classroom"* leave a learning environment that struggles to incorporate a modern, participatory curriculum.

The COVID-19 pandemic showed the impacts of resource scarcity, including the lack of learning infrastructure, evident in countries such as Nepal. The lack of technology and digital literacy worsens already significant educational disparities and shows the lack of institutional support and the need for adaptive assessment strategies. This enables digital learning in combined semester formats and helps balance learning opportunities in a digital environment. The modern semester system is resource-dependent and needs learning materials for self- and inquiry-based learning to be available. Blended learning frameworks are designed based on learning resource availability and self-directed learning. The learning resource gap, especially in Nepal, is made worse by the digital divide among central and peripheral campuses.

Alignment of Course Expectations with Student Readiness

Sharma has observed the lack of adequate institutional support, particularly in rural Nepal, where the central learning campuses are more resource-rich. The learning gap has manifested as frustration and ultimately failure, resulting in increased absenteeism and dropout rates.

Continuous Assessment and Its Administration Issues

The system offers very few mechanisms for academic and motivational issues. For Sharma, the disintegration of accountability is already evident in the semester system. While dealing with the semester system, Sharma notes that “*most students do not complete assignments on time.*” According to Neupane (2023), students miss classes and do not do the work, and teachers do not understand how to evaluate students objectively and fairly; students, for their part, perceive grades as subjective and inconsistent—a situation that is complicated when the semester system emphasizes continuous assessment. Also, there are signs of a lack of discipline, with the campus often not following its internal academic calendar—sessions last up to nine months instead of six. The institutional laxity as well as leniency, combined with the lack of discipline on the part of the students with regard to assignments, severs the concept of continuous assessment and the “right to challenge” the system. Similar challenges have been noted with the assessment deadline in other implementations of the semester system (Pervaiz et al., 2020).

Demographic Decline and Dropout Trend

These issues tend to produce a concrete and harmful result of a significant decline in population. Researchers' observational data “on one group showed participant dropout rates of 50% from the first to the fourth semester. Admission rates dropped from 32 to 18 in the following batches.” This phenomenon, described by the participants' issues, has a significant impact on the operational feasibility of implementing specialized postgraduate programs. As Sharma described, the “*job seeking trend*” combined with the “negligible attraction to the teaching profession” has resulted in the “low admission, high absenteeism and dropout rate.” This has a highly negative impact on the operational feasibility of the semester-based system in the given context. Reduced enrollment means that teaching must be less interactive and less resource-intensive, which makes the program less attractive to potential future postgraduate students, which challenges the long-term operational viability of the semester system in this context.

Adaptation Strategies in the Context and System Improvements

The participants proposed different systemic adaptations, addressing different stakeholder groups, and indicating a strong preference for a systemic (and not a fragmented) approach.

For TU Central Authority

The major recommendations were to modify the delivery modality of the semester system. Participants suggested a shift to a blended or online mode with mandatory contact sessions. This would be a good compromise for students who mix study with work, and who may be distant, but would still have some contact. Likewise, other suggestions included ensuring transparency regarding the grades and scores, textbook availability, and providing regular faculty training as well as dissemination workshops.

For Campus Administration

The campus needs to formulate and apply rigorous internal calendars and provisional regulations. Frequent organization of contract sessions, seminars, and workshops aimed at orienting and engaging students and faculty was underlined. Managing the campus infrastructure and resources also falls on the campus. Dawadi et al. (2024) point out that the unequal access to both technology and digital literacy promotes the already unbalanced educational inequity, and it calls for the adaptation of support and institutional assessments to sustain educational equity in disadvantaged digital/blended learning.

For Teachers

“Competence, updated cum resourcefulness, and accountability” should be the aspiration of all teachers. The discussion notes the counter-productive effect of job insecurity and low wages, but emphasizes the importance of the teaching profession by suggesting that teachers should provide the means to facilitate learning to its “logical end,” beyond the “monetary” dimension of the process, thus acting as “role models.”

For Students

Students are expected to take on a "Proactive role": being on time, taking the initiative, and working as a team. The system shows that it "only recognizes" students who are “active learners”, and not “passive listeners,” that is, who are just sitting and listening to lectures.

It is apparent that the pressures to overcome challenges stem from bottom-to-top policy changes and new behaviors within classrooms. The idea of a blended model is most important and is directly geared toward the critical challenges of physical constraints, student availability, and access to resources. This approach is more relevant than ever in the educational situation after the pandemic (Dhawan, 2020). To address these issues, the case study suggests that the successful implementation of TUs semester system in rural campuses like TMC, Palpa, is more likely to result from implementing blended learning to overcome contextual challenges, coupled with the commitment of all stakeholders.

Conclusion

The case study of TMC, Palpa, illustrates the failure of the semester system. The issues perceived by TMC students and faculty reveal a significant disconnect between what the semester system intends - active participation, continuity of learning, the availability of resources, etc. - and the realities of a rural constituent campus, where there are high levels of student absenteeism, low levels of available resources, administrative bottlenecks, and a shrinking student population. The semester system, in its existing physical cum full-time modality, is impractical for this context. The findings point out that the success of the semester system depends on a broad range of university authority, campus management, teachers, and students. Furthermore, the findings also show that the semester system, in its current form of structural framework, will not be successful. It will only succeed with considerable contextual modifications. The strongest recommendation emanating from this study is that TU should seriously consider a phased implementation of a redesigned online-blended mode for campuses located outside the valley, with flexible online learning and intensive contact sessions. In addition, focused activities are needed to close gaps in resources and faculty training in blended and interactive teaching, and engagement policy should also be revisited to account for the reality of non-traditional students.

Although these findings focus on TMC, Palpa, they provide important insight for Tribhuvan University (TU) as they demonstrate how regional and socioeconomic considerations must be taken into account during semester system reforms. If they are not, an integrated semester system, applied uniformly, will worsen the educational inequalities that exist between the central and peripheral campuses. Adding to the existing literature, the example highlights that accomplishing reforms will require a combination of efforts by: central authorities who will allow some degree of flexibility by offering support and resources; campuses, which will create internal mechanisms to respond to student realities; teachers, who will demonstrate their professionalism; and students, who will take a more active role. Blended learning will be the first pilot study to develop a more participatory approach to learning by testing it in environments that need it and validating the more participatory approach with a wider sample of stakeholders, including those from different professions and with more diverse perspectives. At a glance, Tribhuvan University's mandatory semester system implemented at its rural constituent campuses is a failed practice that demonstrates a misalignment between the system and local realities. Success will move beyond a one-size-fits-all policy to a blended learning approach adaptable to local contexts, more readily designed, built, and supported.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest for the authorship and publication of the manuscript.

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