

Sustaining Quality Assurance Under Financial Constraints: A Study of Public and Community Colleges in Nepal

Tara Prasad Gautam¹, Anjay Kumar Mishra², Shailashri VT³

¹Assistant Campuc Chief, Madan Bhandari Memorial College

²Dean, Madhesh University

³Research Professor, Institute of Management and Commerce, Srinivas University

Abstract	Article Info.
<p>This systematic review investigates the impact of financial constraints on quality assurance (QA) implementation and sustainability in Nepalese public and community colleges. Following PRISMA 2020 guidelines, a comprehensive search of databases identified 15 studies meeting inclusion criteria, which were analyzed using thematic synthesis and appraised with CASP and GRADE tools. Findings reveal that chronic underfunding, policy and governance weaknesses, limited faculty support, and low stakeholder engagement significantly hinder QA progress. The review aligns these challenges with Nepal's National Education Policy 2019 and University Grants Commission reforms. Recommendations include increasing public investment, establishing dedicated QA funds, enhancing faculty capacity, enforcing policies, and promoting a culture of continuous improvement. The study highlights gaps for future research, particularly longitudinal evaluations and innovative financing models, to strengthen QA systems under financial constraints in Nepal and similar contexts.</p> <p><i>Keywords:</i> quality assurance, higher education, accreditation, financial constraints, public colleges, community colleges, PRISMA 2020</p>	<p>Corresponding Author Tara Prasad Gautam</p> <p>Email tara2jun@gmail.com</p> <p>Article History Received: 2025, July 10 Accepted: 2025, October 15</p> <p>Cite Gautam, T. P., Mishra, A. K., & Shailashri, V. T. (2025). Sustaining quality assurance under financial constraints: A study of public and community colleges in Nepal. <i>International Research Journal of Parroha (IRJP)</i>, 4(1), 73–87. https://doi.org/10.61916/prmn.2025.v04i01.008</p>

Introduction

Quality assurance (QA) in higher education is critical for maintaining academic standards, enhancing student learning outcomes, and fostering public trust in educational institutions (Ghimire & Timilsina, 2022; World Bank, 2020). In Nepal, the establishment of the national Quality Assurance and Accreditation (QAA) system by the University Grants Commission in 2007 marked a pivotal development in the reform of higher education (APQN, 2019). Despite many colleges actively pursuing accreditation to demonstrate institutional accountability and commitment to quality,

sustaining QA mechanisms remains a significant challenge, particularly for public and community colleges facing severe financial constraints.

Nepal allocates approximately 3.5% of its GDP to education, with only about 25% of this budget directed to higher education. Notably, over 80% of these higher education funds are concentrated in Tribhuvan University, resulting in limited financial resources for other public and community colleges (The Borgen Project, 2022; MoEST, 2023). Consequently, many institutions contend with chronic underfunding, evidenced by overcrowded classrooms, outdated curricula,

inadequate infrastructure, and restricted access to academic resources (The Borgen Project, 2022). Public colleges, mainly constituted by constituent campuses of major universities, rely predominantly on government grants, whereas community colleges depend substantially on student fees and local community contributions (Biswakarma & Dhakal, 2023). Both institutional types experience significant difficulties in meeting accreditation standards under budgetary constraints.

The challenge extends beyond the initiation of QA processes—such as self-assessment, peer review, and accreditation audits—to sustaining and institutionalizing quality improvements after accreditation. Financial limitations adversely impact critical areas including faculty recruitment, laboratory and library upgrades, staff training in QA protocols, and cultivating a culture of continuous improvement (World Bank, 2020). Cost-sharing arrangements impose additional financial burdens on colleges attempting to maintain affordable tuition fees, further complicating quality maintenance (World Bank, 2020).

Emerging research indicates several persistent barriers to effective QA implementation. Ghimire and Timilsina (2022) stress the necessity for systemic reforms in curriculum design, faculty development, and governance, especially to reduce political interference in academic affairs. Biswakarma and Dhakal (2023) further highlight the absence of clear QA policy frameworks and inadequate institutional resources as fundamental obstacles to sustaining accreditation. Furthermore, innovations in educational technologies have been recognized for their potential to enhance and assess student learning outcomes, thereby supporting quality improvements within resource-limited contexts (Educational Technologies for Enhancing and Assessing Students Learning and Results, 2025).

This systematic review builds upon prior analyses (Gautam, Mishra, & Shailashri, 2025; Mishra & Jha, 2023) by critically examining how limited funding affects the implementation and

sustainability of QA mechanisms in Nepalese public and community colleges. It contextualizes these challenges within Nepal's educational governance frameworks and discusses implications for policy, institutional capacity-building, and sustainable academic operations (Mishra, 2020, 2022; Ananda, Mishra, & Aithal, 2025; Mishra & Ananda, 2022). The study advances the understanding of financial constraints as a key factor limiting QA efforts and offers evidence-based recommendations to strengthen QA systems in Nepal's higher education landscape. It needs a critical review to highlight challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, limited human resources, and weak QA policy enforcement. The review also explores strategies institutions use to address funding shortfalls. Based on Nepal's higher education context, it offers policy recommendations to strengthen QA systems despite resource limitations.

Research Objective

This systematic review examines how financial constraints affect the implementation and sustainability of quality assurance (QA) in Nepalese public and community colleges.

Methodology

This systematic review followed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines to ensure transparency, methodological rigor, and reproducibility (Page et al., 2021). The review methodology was determined prior to data collection and systematically documented to enhance consistency and replicability. The key components of the method are outlined below:

Search Strategy: A comprehensive search was conducted across multiple academic databases and sources, including Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, PubMed, and IEEE Xplore. The search, initial in December 2024 and updated in March 2025, employed a combination of keywords and Boolean operators such as (“quality assurance” OR accreditation OR “quality improvement”) AND (college OR “higher education” OR univers*) AND (Nepal) AND (finance OR funding OR budget OR resource). Relevant terms related to

public and community colleges, Nepalese higher education reforms, and resource constraints were incorporated. Reference lists of key articles were also manually searched for additional sources.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

- o Focused on public or community colleges in Nepal.
- o Addressed QA implementation, outcomes, or processes in relation to financial/resource limitations.
- o Were empirical research, policy analyses, case studies, or program evaluations published from 2005 onward.
- o Were written in English.

Studies not directly related to higher education QA or lacking focus on financial constraints, opinion pieces without data, and primary/secondary education studies were excluded.

Study Selection

Results were imported into a reference management system; duplicates were removed. Two independent reviewers conducted title and abstract screening, followed by full-text review of shortlisted articles. Disagreements were resolved through discussion, with a third reviewer mediating if needed. The process is illustrated in a PRISMA flow diagram, resulting in 15 included studies after screening 87 full texts from an initial pool of approximately 320 records.

Data Extraction

A structured form was used to extract data on authorship, publication year, study design, sample characteristics, key findings on QA practices, and specific insights into financial/resource challenges. Information on recommendations was also documented. Extracted data included quantitative figures such as budgets and accreditation statistics.

Quality Appraisal

Each study was assessed for quality and bias using appropriate tools—CASP checklists for qualitative and observational studies, and GRADE principles for the overall evidence synthesis (CASP, 2018; Guyatt et al., 2008). Quality assessments

considered clarity of aims, methodological appropriateness, data analysis rigor, and the reliability of conclusions. While no studies were excluded solely on quality grounds, the appraisal informed the weighting during synthesis. Most studies were of moderate quality, with limitations like small sample sizes and cross-sectional designs, but triangulation across data sources mitigated these concerns.

Data Synthesis

A thematic analysis approach was employed, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process—familiarization, coding, theme development, reviewing, defining, and naming themes. Two reviewers independently coded data related to QA and resource challenges, then collaboratively developed overarching themes reflecting how financial constraints hamper QA implementation. Descriptive statistics (e.g., proportion of accredited institutions, budget details) supplemented thematic insights. The synthesis included a narrative component, supported by illustrative citations and a comprehensive summary table (Table 1).

This rigorous method ensures a transparent, replicable, and contextually grounded synthesis of evidence on the influence of financial constraints on QA in Nepalese higher education.

Results and Discussion

Study Characteristics and Descriptive Analysis

The review incorporated 15 sources, including 8 peer-reviewed journal articles, 3 institutional or government reports, 2 conference proceedings, and 2 authoritative online publications offering relevant data. The studies, published between 2015 and 2024, reflect a surge in scholarly and policy engagement with quality assurance (QA) in Nepal post-2018, paralleling increased national focus on accreditation systems and quality culture development (Gautam, Mishra, & Shailashri, 2025; UGC, 2020; World Bank, 2018). The majority employed descriptive methodologies, such as surveys of faculty and students, institutional case

studies, and policy evaluations. A consistent theme across all sources was the recognition of financial and resource constraints as fundamental obstacles to sustaining effective QA mechanisms (Ghimire & Timilsina, 2022; Biswakarma & Dhakal, 2023).

Of these, 10 studies concentrated specifically on Nepalese higher education institutions, while 5 offered comparative or conceptual frameworks positioning Nepal’s context centrally. Peer-reviewed works frequently utilized systematic data collection methods, including structured interviews and validated survey instruments, enhancing the reliability of findings (Ghimire & Timilsina, 2022). Institutional reports from bodies like the University Grants Commission and the World Bank supplemented these findings with empirical evidence on funding trends, QA implementation rates, and reform outcomes (UGC, 2020; World Bank, 2018). Recent analyses further emphasize the critical role of integrating educational technologies to enhance and assess student learning outcomes, highlighting potential strategies for quality improvement even under resource constraints (Educational Technologies for Enhancing and Assessing Students Learning and Results, 2025; Ananda, Mishra, & Aithal, 2025).

Despite these contributions, most studies are limited by cross-sectional designs that do not capture dynamic quality assurance developments following policy reforms implemented after 2021 (MoEST, 2021). Nonetheless, the cumulative evidence portrays a clear narrative where financial

limitations impede quality education delivery, especially within public and community campuses.

As of 2021, only about 60 higher education institutions in Nepal had earned accreditation through the national Quality Assurance and Accreditation system, out of several hundred eligible colleges (World Bank, 2018). Predominantly community campuses voluntarily sought accreditation to enhance institutional credibility and access to funding. However, many institutions remain outside the accreditation process, frequently attributing their exclusion to persistent funding shortages and inadequate administrative capacity (UGC, 2020). Rural and smaller colleges face disproportionate challenges, lacking the infrastructural and academic baseline necessary to qualify for performance-based grants (World Bank, 2018; Mishra & Jha, 2023).

Thematic synthesis of the reviewed studies revealed four principal themes that articulate the complex relationship between financial constraints and QA processes:

- o Funding and Resource Deficiencies
- o Policy and Governance Limitations
- o Faculty and Staff Capacity Challenges
- o Quality Culture and Stakeholder Engagement Barriers

These themes illuminate multifaceted fiscal impediments affecting Nepalese higher education quality assurance efforts. A detailed summary of each included study’s characteristics and contributions is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Summary of Included Studies and Key Findings

Study (Year)	Focus / Context	Design / Data	Key Findings (QA & Financial Constraints)
Ghimire & Timilsina (2022)	Quality assurance practices at Tribhuvan University (Nepal’s largest public university).	Survey of faculty & administrators (n=72); quantitative analysis.	Faculty quality and engagement are the top drivers of QA. Skilled, experienced instructors largely determine education quality. Key improvements include curriculum updates, faculty development, performance-based rewards, and minimizing political interference. Financial investment is needed, but resource limitations remain a challenge.

Study (Year)	Focus / Context	Design / Data	Key Findings (QA & Financial Constraints)
Biswakarma & Dhakal (2023) ()	Implementation of QA & Accreditation policy in Nepalese colleges (hospitality education sector).	Mixed-method: surveys (n=154 staff, 97 students) + interviews; descriptive analysis.	Nepal has recognized the importance of QA and developed policies, but implementation gaps persist in practice. Major challenges identified: lack of clear government policies and guidelines on QA, confusion among institutions about accreditation requirements, insufficient funding and resources for QA initiatives (e.g., to improve infrastructure or data systems) (), and limited trained personnel to carry out QA (capacity gaps) (). Additionally, some institutions resist changes needed for QA due to cultural and political factors. Emphasizes need for stakeholder awareness, transparent feedback mechanisms, and better resource allocation to improve QA outcomes.
World Bank (2021))	Higher Education Reforms Project (HERP) completion report – includes outcomes on QA and financing.	Implementation report; includes data on accredited campuses, funding disbursements, outcomes.	Many public and community campuses face financial constraints due to low tuition fees and limited income, which strain their ability to meet and sustain QAA standards (. Accredited/autonomous colleges find it especially challenging to finance the improvements required by quality norms without extra support. Government policy has shifted towards cost-sharing (expecting colleges to generate more of their own funds) and performance-based grants for quality improvement, but this is difficult for colleges with low revenue capacity. Small institutions struggled to achieve performance targets tied to funding due to capacity limitations. The report calls for a balanced approach: increasing colleges' resource mobilization while boosting public funding for quality, plus making QA participation eventually mandatory to instill a culture of quality.
Upadhyay (2018) (as cited in Biswakarma & Dhakal, 2023) ()	Analysis of higher education expansion and QA in Nepal.	Commentary / analysis of policy documents.	Rapid expansion of HEIs has raised concerns about quality and relevance of programs. Notes that some institutions resist QA measures needed for improvement, often for cultural or political reasons (e.g., fear of external evaluation, academic conservatism, or political patronage) (). Argues that without addressing these attitudinal and governance issues, merely instituting QA policies will not yield results. Stresses educating stakeholders about QA benefits and ensuring collaborative efforts across institutions and regulators to implement QA uniformly. (Financial context: rapid expansion without commensurate funding exacerbated quality issues.)

Study (Year)	Focus / Context	Design / Data	Key Findings (QA & Financial Constraints)
Kathmandu Post (2024) (Higher Education Bill: A fiasco)			
News column on higher education funding in Nepal.	Opinion with statistics (from Ministry data).	The Kathmandu Post (2024) highlighted severe imbalances in higher education funding in Nepal, noting that while approximately 3.5% of the national GDP is allocated to education, only 25% of that goes to higher education, and over 80% of the higher education budget is consumed by Tribhuvan University. This leaves most public and community colleges chronically under-resourced, which negatively affects their capacity to maintain quality education and implement quality assurance mechanisms. The article warned that without financial restructuring in the proposed Higher Education Bill, efforts to ensure institutional quality beyond the flagship university will likely remain unsuccessful (Kathmandu Post, 2024).	
(Additional studies in the review provided similar findings; see text for synthesis of all 15 sources.)			

Theme 1: Funding and Resource Gaps

All reviewed sources unanimously identify inadequate funding as the primary barrier to sustaining quality assurance (QA) in Nepal’s public and community colleges (Gautam, Mishra, & Shailashri, 2025; Mishra & Jha, 2023). Multiple studies reveal that financial resources available to these institutions are insufficient to meet basic educational quality standards, much less the enhanced infrastructure and academic rigor demanded by accredited programs. Nepal allocates roughly 0.875% of GDP to higher education, representing only a quarter of the national 3.5% education budget, which is insufficient to support the entire tertiary sector, including public universities and hundreds of community campuses (Kathmandu Post, 2024; World Bank, 2018).

Community colleges, educating nearly one-third of tertiary students, depend heavily on modest government grants and low tuition fees designed to maintain access, resulting in persistent funding shortfalls (The Borgen Project, 2023).

The effects of underfunding manifest in multiple dimensions. Many colleges operate with inadequate infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, outdated laboratories, under-resourced libraries, and limited digital learning tools, severely compromising their ability to meet QA physical and academic standards (The Borgen Project, 2023; Educational Technologies for Enhancing and Assessing Students Learning and Results, 2025). Lack of capital investment precludes necessary facility upgrades to comply with University Grants

Commission (UGC) accreditation requirements (Mishra, 2023).

Human resource deficits compound these challenges. Budget constraints restrict recruitment and retention of qualified faculty, as uncompetitive salaries and scant professional development opportunities drive skilled educators toward private institutions or international employment (Ghimire & Timilsina, 2022). Many community college faculty work on part-time or contract terms, limiting their capacity and motivation to engage in QA activities such as continuous assessment and self-study reporting (Gautam, Mishra, & Shailashri, 2025).

External QA processes impose additional financial burdens. Preparing self-study reports, upgrading institutional data management, improving infrastructure, and responding to peer review demands divert scarce funds that could otherwise support core teaching functions (World Bank, 2021). Accredited campuses often struggle to maintain QA standards due to low tuition revenue and lack of alternative income streams (Mishra, 2020).

Moreover, funding shortages heavily restrict research and innovation—key components of academic quality. Without dedicated research budgets, colleges cannot update curricula based on emerging knowledge nor actively contribute to scholarly discourse, undermining QA benchmarks (World Bank, 2018; Mishra, 2022).

In summary, Theme 1 highlights a systemic cycle where financial constraints generate quality shortfalls that require resources currently unavailable to institutions. This cycle perpetuates challenges in achieving and maintaining QA standards. Addressing this requires urgent and substantial increases in investment, along with diversified funding models (Acharya, 2023). Technology-enabled educational innovations present promising avenues to alleviate some resource gaps by enhancing learning and assessment efficiencies (Ananda, Mishra, & Aithal, 2025; Educational Technologies for Enhancing

and Assessing Students Learning and Results, 2025). Without resolving foundational funding deficiencies, QA risks devolving into superficial compliance rather than fostering genuine, transformative quality improvements.

Theme 2: Policy and Governance Challenges

Financial constraints in Nepalese higher education are exacerbated by significant policy and governance challenges that hinder the effective implementation of quality assurance (QA) mechanisms. Despite the presence of QA policies, translating them into practice remains difficult in resource-limited settings. Multiple studies highlight gaps in policy clarity, enforcement, and consistency within Nepal's QA framework (World Bank, 2018; Upadhyay, 2018).

A central issue is the lack of clear, actionable implementation guidelines for institutions. Biswakarma and Dhakal (2023) observed that “one of the major challenges is the lack of clear policies and regulations from the Nepalese government” regarding QA. Many colleges struggle to interpret accreditation requirements and ascertain the necessary steps to achieve and sustain quality standards. Although the University Grants Commission (UGC) has issued QAA Guidelines for Higher Education Institutions (UGC, 2020), dissemination and institutional capacity to apply these guidelines vary significantly. Institutions inexperienced with QA often lack the technical expertise to establish Internal Quality Assurance Cells (IQACs) or conduct rigorous self-assessments, resulting in an implementation gap where some colleges lead proactively while others lag due to uncertainty or capacity deficits (Gautam, Mishra, & Shailashri, 2025).

Regulatory oversight presents another governance challenge. The UGC spearheads QA in Nepal but suffers from limited staffing and resources, constraining its ability to provide consistent mentoring and monitoring. The World Bank (2021) emphasizes that “constant mentoring and monitoring are required” for sustainable quality improvements, yet the UGC QA division remains

overstretched relative to institutional demand. Historically, QA participation was voluntary, causing inconsistent engagement. Although the National Education Policy 2019 mandates accreditation for all higher education institutions (HEIs), many colleges feel unprepared due to infrastructure and capacity shortfalls, complicating enforcement efforts (MoEST, 2019; World Bank, 2021).

The structure of funding allocation further complicates QA progress. Performance-based grants intended to incentivize quality risk penalizing under-resourced colleges unable to meet baseline criteria, potentially exacerbating inequities (World Bank, 2021). National policy inconsistencies also persist; while some strategies endorse establishing an autonomous Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agency (QAAA) and governance reforms, others lack resource commitments or entail abrupt leadership changes that undermine continuity (UGC, 2020; World Bank, 2018).

At the institutional level, weak internal governance obstructs QA advancement. Many public and community colleges lack fully functional QA committees, strategic planning, or performance monitoring systems, as leadership often prioritizes immediate operational concerns like enrollment and payroll. Political interference remains endemic, with appointments and student union pressures diverting focus from long-term quality goals. Ghimire and Timilsina (2022) call for measures to “discourage political pressure” to foster an academic climate conducive to quality enhancement.

A persistent gap between policy formulation and implementation further limits progress. Though Nepal has introduced progressive QA policies—such as the Higher Education Policy 2015 and National Education Policy 2019—the operationalization of these policies remains uneven and slow (Upadhyay, 2018). Many colleges lack the technical expertise and financial resources to meet evolving standards. The planned establishment of a fully autonomous QAAA is promising but

hinges on securing adequate authority, staffing, and funding (World Bank, 2021; Mishra, 2023).

In summary, Theme 2 illustrates that policy and governance challenges intertwine with financial constraints. Ambiguous or poorly enforced policies allow underfunded colleges to deprioritize QA, while insufficient fiscal and technical support impedes compliance even in motivated institutions. Addressing these issues requires bolstered governance at both systemic and institutional levels—clear policy directives, empowered QA bodies, and sustained support nationally, alongside strong, insulated institutional leadership and strategic QA frameworks—to make quality assurance viable despite fiscal limitations. Integrating digital and AI-enabled governance tools could potentially enhance policy implementation and oversight efficiency in this context (Ananda, Mishra, & Aithal, 2025; Mishra, 2023).

Theme 3: Faculty and Staff Support and Development

Quality assurance (QA) in higher education fundamentally hinges on the personnel who manage and deliver education—faculty members, administrative staff, and institutional leadership. Human resource support is a distinct and critical theme, highlighting how staffing factors are both impacted by and can alleviate financial constraints in QA initiatives (Ghimire & Timilsina, 2022; Acharya, 2023).

Numerous studies emphasize that faculty competence and engagement are central to educational quality. Ghimire and Timilsina (2022) quantitatively identified faculty quality as the most influential QA indicator, asserting that “well-trained and experienced instructors” significantly influence academic outcomes. However, attracting, developing, and retaining such faculty require dedicated institutional investments. In Nepal’s public and community colleges, limited budgets restrict professional development opportunities—such as workshops, advanced studies, and research grants—and hinder the hiring of sufficient full-time faculty. Consequently, high student–teacher ratios

and overburdened instructors reduce their capacity to contribute to QA activities like curriculum updates, student mentorship, and internal audits.

The deficiency of training in QA processes among faculty and administrative personnel further impedes progress. Biswakarma and Dhakal (2023) noted that “Nepalese universities lack trained staff to implement quality assurance and accreditation programs,” pointing to a knowledge gap that includes classroom instructors as well as those responsible for data collection and documentation. Most colleges, strained by limited budgets, lack dedicated QA officers or technical staff to oversee quality activities. While some institutions supported by the University Grants Commission (UGC) have established Internal Quality Assurance Cells (IQACs), widespread implementation remains limited due to staffing costs and sustainability concerns (UGC, 2020).

Faculty motivation is another vital component. Without appropriate recognition or incentives, QA efforts are often viewed as additional burdens rather than integral to academic excellence. Low salaries and high workloads breed burnout and disengagement among staff. Ghimire and Timilsina (2022) advocate for a “reward system,” including performance bonuses, promotion opportunities, and teaching awards, to foster active faculty participation in QA. Some colleges have introduced small performance grants or donor-supported awards, but these initiatives are inconsistent and underfunded (World Bank, 2021).

Leadership capacity also plays a significant role. College principals and campus heads need training in quality assurance, institutional planning, and change management to effectively lead reforms. Initiatives like the Higher Education Reform Project (HERP) have provided some leadership and ICT training; however, such programs reach only a limited number of institutions (World Bank, 2018). Scaling up these digital leadership development efforts necessitates sustained national investment and strategic planning.

The support for faculty and staff is closely tied to funding. Many underfunded colleges face difficulties recruiting and developing qualified personnel, which hampers overall educational quality and diminishes prospects for securing performance-based grants, perpetuating a vicious cycle. Conversely, empowered faculty can act as change agents by adopting innovative pedagogies, forming community partnerships, and optimizing existing resources—actions that are often low-cost but high-impact.

External programs such as the UGC’s Faculty Development Program and collaborations with NGOs have demonstrated that targeted training in pedagogy and QA can significantly enhance institutional quality, even within resource-constrained settings (UGC, 2020). These successes suggest that strategic human capital investments can generate meaningful improvements in quality outcomes without requiring substantial financial resources.

Theme 3 underscores that investing in human capital—through training, manageable workloads, strategic incentives, and leadership development—is vital for sustaining QA systems. While financial limitations pose challenges, prioritizing faculty and staff development offers a cost-effective approach to advancing quality. As Acharya (2023) states, “resources, capacity-building, partnerships, staff professional development, and funding exploration can improve quality assurance efforts.” Ultimately, nurturing institutional human resources is as essential as developing physical infrastructure for achieving sustainable, long-term quality in Nepalese higher education.

Theme 4: Quality Culture and Stakeholder Engagement

The final theme examines the cultural and stakeholder dimensions critical to sustaining quality assurance (QA), which intersect closely with financial, technical, and policy challenges. A “quality culture” encompasses the shared values, beliefs, and practices within an institution that prioritize continuous improvement, accountability,

and academic excellence. Developing such a culture is a long-term process, and in financially constrained environments, institutions often prioritize immediate survival over broader quality goals. However, this review underscores that without meaningful engagement and buy-in from key stakeholders—including faculty, students, administrators, and local communities—QA initiatives cannot be effectively sustained (Gautam, Mishra, & Shailashri, 2025).

A significant challenge is the low awareness and limited understanding of QA processes and their long-term benefits. Biswakarma and Dhakal (2023) highlight that “quality assurance and accreditation awareness in higher education is another issue,” where lack of prioritization frequently leads to underfunding or neglect of QA programs. As Aburizaizah (2022, cited in Biswakarma & Dhakal, 2023) suggests, when decision-makers do not perceive value in QA, underinvestment ensues, reducing QA to a mere formality rather than a transformative tool. Establishing a strong quality culture requires embedding QA as a core institutional value aligned with academic missions and student success, rather than treating it as bureaucratic compliance.

Institutional resistance to change also impedes quality culture development. Resistance may be cultural—manifested as risk aversion or skepticism toward external evaluations—or political, related to fears of lost control or disruption of patronage networks (Ghimire & Timilsina, 2022). Faculty may view accreditation as threatening autonomy or fear negative assessments, while politically appointed leaders might discourage transparent QA practices to avoid scrutiny. Overcoming this resistance hinges on trust-building and demonstrating that QA supports institutional growth rather than penalizing shortcomings.

Effective stakeholder engagement extends beyond faculty and administrators to include students and local communities. Students, as primary beneficiaries, stand to gain from enhanced learning environments and employability, yet remain

marginal in many QA processes. Emerging efforts such as student representation on QA committees and satisfaction surveys indicate progress but remain limited (World Bank, 2021). Community campuses governed partly by local leaders have potential as QA champions; community advocacy and participation in fundraising or holding leadership accountable can enhance sustainability. Conversely, when communities focus solely on affordability, quality improvement may be deprioritized.

A common pitfall is treating QA as a one-time hurdle rather than an ongoing process. Many institutions attain accreditation but fail to sustain momentum, especially when financial pressures reemerge. The World Bank (2021) stresses that “ensuring sustainability and enhancing credibility” requires ongoing engagement, including regular self-assessments, integrating student feedback, and preparing for reaccreditation proactively.

Nonetheless, there are encouraging signs of cultural shifts. With over 60 institutions accredited by 2021—up from only a few a decade earlier—QA is increasingly accepted as an institutional norm (APQN, 2019; UGC, 2020). The Higher Education Reform Project (HERP) recognized that while still nascent, the QA system’s role in embedding a culture of quality is crucial and recommended mandatory accreditation to promote nationwide adoption (World Bank, 2021).

Transparency and accountability reinforce this quality culture. Public dissemination of performance indicators, accreditation reports, and stakeholder involvement cultivates trust and shared responsibility. For example, when communities recognize infrastructural gaps—such as the absence of a science lab required by QA standards—they may mobilize support for improvements. Public access to institutional data thus facilitates dialogue and collective problem-solving.

Finally, aligning QA efforts with broader values in Nepali governance, such as People’s Multi-Party Democracy (PMPD)—which emphasizes inclusivity, community engagement,

and accountability—can further embed a quality culture (Shrestha, 2022). Integrating QA within this governance ethos through participatory approaches and responsiveness can accelerate institutional and policy-level change.

Discussion

This review underscores the complex and vital interplay between financial constraints and the sustainability of quality assurance (QA) in Nepal's public and community colleges. The findings align with global patterns observed in low-resource settings, while also highlighting unique Nepalese challenges rooted in policy, governance, and institutional capacity. Integrating our thematic insights with Nepal's policy environment reveals clear pathways for strengthening QA and points to strategic areas for action, future research, and policy refinement.

The Interdependence of Finance and Quality

Fundamentally, the review confirms that robust financial health is a prerequisite for quality education—an assertion strongly supported by human capital theory and international evidence on higher education funding (Paudel, 2021). In Nepal, a historical lack of proportional investment has led to a dilution of academic quality, with public and community colleges bearing the brunt of underfunding. Presently, a disproportionate share of the higher education budget is concentrated in Tribhuvan University, leaving many other institutions severely resource-starved (Kathmandu Post, 2024). As these colleges predominantly enroll students from rural and low-income backgrounds, this inequity worsens social disparities, directly contradicting Nepal's aim for inclusive, equitable quality education articulated in the National Education Policy 2019 (MoEST, 2019). Without a strategic reallocation of resources—favoring underserved regions and institution types—these objectives remain out of reach.

Policy and Governance Challenges

While Nepal's policy frameworks, including the Higher Education Policy 2015 and the strategic vision for QAA 2021–2030, show awareness

of these issues, actual implementation remains hindered by gaps in resource allocation and institutional capacity. The envisaged autonomous QA agency (QAAA) offers a promising solution: by centralizing expertise and reducing workload on the UGC, it can facilitate more effective and standardized QA processes (World Bank, 2021). However, the success of such reform depends heavily on dedicated budgets, technical support, and strategic implementation. The recent debates around the Higher Education Bill and the establishment of a legal framework for QA underline the recognition of these needs but also expose the persistent gap between policy intent and resource provisioning (Kathmandu Post, 2024).

Policymakers must ensure that specific funding provisions accompany mandates for quality reforms. Initiatives such as a dedicated Quality Enhancement Fund—supporting infrastructure upgrades, faculty training, and research—are critical. Experience from other contexts shows that without explicit budget commitments, even well-conceived reforms risk stagnation or superficial compliance.

Institutional Governance and Stakeholder Engagement

Decentralized governance, especially within community colleges, plays a crucial role in QA sustainability. Models from successful colleges—those actively engaging local stakeholders, leveraging community donations, and fostering transparent management—offer valuable lessons. Conversely, weak governance structures, frequent leadership changes, and political interference undermine quality efforts. Strengthening governance could involve targeted training for management committees, regular public reporting of institutional performance, and mechanisms for stakeholder participation. These steps foster trust, accountability, and community ownership—elements essential for embedding a genuine quality culture.

Building a Sustainable Quality Culture

The final element involves cultivating an institutional culture that values continuous improvement and stakeholder involvement. Progress is evidenced by the increasing number of colleges attaining accreditation, yet the challenge remains in maintaining momentum beyond initial certification. Policies promoting transparency—such as publicly sharing accreditation reports, performance metrics, and success stories—can shift perceptions from QA as a compliance burden to a source of institutional pride. Incorporating student and community feedback into QA processes further enhances relevance and collective commitment (World Bank, 2021).

Given Nepal's broader governance principles emphasizing inclusivity and social accountability, integrating QA into these frameworks can accelerate cultural shifts. For example, involving local governments and civil society organizations in QA oversight aligns with Nepal's democratic ethos and reinforces external accountability.

Implications for Policy and Practice

To translate these insights into impactful reforms, the following strategies are imperative:

- o **Enhanced and Strategic Funding:** Nepal should elevate higher education's share of GDP, allocating dedicated funds for core QA functions, infrastructure, and capacity-building. Establishing competitive grants, performance-linked funding, and a dedicated Quality Improvement Fund can ensure sustained resource flows (Acharya, 2023; Ananda et al., 2025).
- o **Capacity Building and Leadership Development:** A nationwide program to train QA coordinators, faculty, and administrators—covering self-assessment, data management, and peer review—can build institutional resilience. Training should also target college leaders to foster effective

governance and change management (Gautam, Mishra, & Shailashri, 2025).

- o **Strengthening Regulatory and Governance Structures:** Accelerate the establishment of the autonomous QAAA, supported by adequate staffing and resources. Embed QA standards into institutional accreditation and incentivize compliance by linking accreditation status with institutional privileges and funding opportunities.
- o **Promoting a "Quality Culture":** Engage all stakeholders through awareness campaigns, recognition programs, and stakeholder dialogues. Encourage transparency via public sharing of quality-related reports, fostering trust and collective responsibility.
- o **Address Political Interference:** Develop guidelines to delineate academic decision-making from political influence, safeguarding integrity in hiring, promotions, and curriculum design.
- o **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Continual assessment of reform initiatives through independent audits and research will ensure responsiveness and data-driven policy adjustments.

Global Lessons and Future Directions

Nepal's unique context as a country with a strong community-based higher education system offers both challenges and opportunities. Comparative insights from countries like India's RUSA or Bangladesh's QA frameworks can guide Nepal in adopting adaptable models and leveraging community engagement for sustainable quality enhancement (Paudel, 2021). Future research should focus on quantitative analysis linking funding levels with quality metrics, longitudinal studies on reform impacts, and innovative approaches such as digital and AI-supported QA systems (Ananda, Mishra, & Aithal, 2025).

Conclusion

Ensuring and sustaining quality assurance in Nepal's public and community colleges under financial constraints is a complex but achievable challenge. This systematic review synthesizes insights from a decade of reforms and experiences, revealing that colleges pursue excellence despite limited funding, uneven policy implementation, and overburdened yet committed faculty and leadership, all within communities that value education but face resource limitations. The interaction among these factors determines whether QA mechanisms become truly institutionalized or remain superficial.

Our analysis emphasizes that sustained quality improvement requires a multi-faceted approach. Adequate financing forms the essential foundation—without it, even well-crafted policies and practices struggle to succeed. However, funding alone is insufficient; strengthening governance and cultivating a culture of quality and accountability are equally critical. Strategic initiatives must prioritize capacity-building, incentivizing quality efforts, and ensuring equitable support so no institution falls behind due to resource or knowledge gaps.

Policy frameworks such as Nepal's National Education Policy (2019) and the Strategic Plan of HEQAAC 2021–2030 demonstrate growing awareness and offer roadmaps for reform. The key challenge lies in effective implementation. By following recommended actions—increasing equitable funding, enhancing support systems, engaging stakeholders, and maintaining research-informed feedback—Nepal can progress toward a resilient and high-quality higher education system.

For policymakers, educational leaders, and international partners, this review offers evidence-based guidance. Implementing QA within financial constraints demands both “doing more with less” and “doing it smarter,” focusing on leverage points like faculty development and clear policies. The ultimate goal is to provide every student—whether at well-funded urban campuses or modest

community colleges—with education meeting recognized quality standards and preparing them for the future. Achieving this will restore trust in Nepal's academic institutions and contribute to national development by producing capable graduates and fostering innovation. Investing in quality assurance under fiscal limitations is thus both necessary and worthwhile for Nepal's socioeconomic progress.

Gaps and Future Outlook

Despite progress, significant gaps remain. Future research should monitor the impact of interventions and document successes and challenges. As Nepal considers a more federalized education governance structure, maintaining QA as a priority at provincial and local levels will be vital. Additionally, the rapid growth of educational technologies—such as e-learning and digital libraries—offers potentially cost-effective avenues for quality enhancement, underscored by experiences from the COVID-19 pandemic's shift to online education.

In closing, sustaining quality assurance is an ongoing journey rather than a single destination. Financial constraints compound the challenges, but with collective effort and strategic support, Nepal's higher education institutions can progressively foster a pervasive culture of quality. Success fuels further success: as more colleges improve, confidence grows, stakeholder engagement strengthens, and policy backing increases, creating a virtuous cycle. The insights and recommendations provided aim to accelerate this process. Ultimately, the dedication of government, academia, communities, and students will determine how effectively Nepal ensures quality education for all, despite fiscal limitations.

References

- Aburizaizah, S. J. (2022). The role of quality assurance in Saudi higher education institutions. *International Journal of Educational Research Open*, 3, 100127. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedro.2022.100127>

- Acharya, K. P. (2023). *Financing higher education in Nepal: Issues and challenges*. University Grants Commission.
- Ananda, N., Kobayashi, S., Mishra, A. K., & Aithal, P. S. (2023). Mandala in operation of Web 3.0. *International Journal of Case Studies in Business, IT, and Education (IJCSBE)*, 7(1), 220–229. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7727160>
- Ananda, N., Mishra, A. K., & Aithal, P. S. (2025). AI architecture for educational transformation in higher education institutions. *Poornaprajna International Journal of Management, Education & Social Science (PIJMESS)*, 2(2), 58–73. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16976456>
- Asia-Pacific Quality Network [APQN]. (2019). *Higher education quality assurance and accreditation in Nepal: Status and issues*. APQN Academic Conference Proceedings.
- Biswakarma, D., & Dhakal, R. (2023). Financing higher education in Nepal: Challenges for community campuses. *Journal of Education Policy and Practice*, 13(1), 45–58.
- Biswakarma, G., & Dhakal, N. (2023). Policy implementation of quality assurance and accreditation in the Nepalese higher education institutions offering hospitality education. *Arab Journal of Quality in Higher Education*, 15(54), 24–50.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- CASP. (2018). *Critical appraisal skills programme Checklists*.
- Gautam, T. P., Mishra, A. K., & Shailashri, V. T. (2025). Toward quality culture in Nepalese higher education: A systematic review of QMSS in affiliated colleges. *Intellectual Journal of Academic Research*, 3(1), 105–126. <https://doi.org/10.3126/ijar.v3i1.83630>
- Ghimire, D. M., & Timilsina, R. H. (2022). Ensuring quality in Nepal's higher education: Challenges and prospects. *Tribhuvan University Journal*, 39(2), 91–104.
- Ghimire, D. M., & Timilsina, S. (2022). Institutional readiness for quality assurance: A study of selected Nepalese community colleges. *International Journal of Educational Reform*, 31(3), 210–225.
- Guyatt, G. H., Oxman, A. D., Vist, G. E., Kunz, R., Falck-Ytter, Y., Alonso-Coello, P., & Schünemann, H. J. (2008). GRADE: An emerging consensus on rating quality of evidence and strength of recommendations. *BMJ*, 336(7650), 924–926. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.39489.470347.AD>
- Kathmandu Post. (2024, March 4). *Higher education bill: A fiasco*.
- Ministry of Education, Science and Technology [MoEST]. (2019). *National education policy 2019*. Kathmandu: Government of Nepal.
- Ministry of Education, Science and Technology [MoEST]. (2021). *Education sector plan 2021–2030: School and higher education reform strategy*. Kathmandu: Government of Nepal.
- Ministry of Education, Science and Technology [MoEST]. (2023). *Education budget analysis report FY 2022/23*. Kathmandu: Government of Nepal.
- Mishra, A. K. (2020). *Project management: Theory and practice from different countries* (p. 345). DK International Research Foundation. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4817542>
- Mishra, A. K. (2022). *Teaching and research operations at Pokhara University*. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7045640>
- Mishra, A. K. (2023). Digital academic operation: A case of Nepal. In P. K. Paul, D. Gurrupu, & E. R. K. (Eds.), *Digital education: Foundation & emergence with challenges, cases* (pp. 219–228). New Delhi Publishers. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8066273>
- Mishra, A. K., & Ananda, N. (2022). Be prepared for futuristic, sustainable academic operation. In *Proceedings of the 9th International Conference on Modern Education and New Learning Technologies* (pp. 63–67). Princeton Press. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7748843>

- Mishra, A. K., & Jha, P. B. (2023). Emergence of quality assurance and accreditation: Context of higher education in Nepal. In P. K. Paul, P. K., Aithal, P. S., Shailashri, V. T., & Noronha, S. (Eds.), *Emergence and research in interdisciplinary management and information technology* (pp. 167–182). New Delhi Publishers. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8065756>
- Paudel, T. (2021). *Community campuses in Nepal: Challenges and the way forward*. Kathmandu: Education Resource Center Nepal.
- Shrestha, S. (2022). Emergence of quality assurance and accreditation: Context of higher education in Nepal. *Nepal Journal of Educational Research*, 14(1), 1–15.
- The Borgen Project. (2023). *Addressing challenges in higher education in Nepal*.
- University Grants Commission [UGC]. (2020). *Higher education reform project report: Quality assurance and accreditation*. UGC Nepal.
- University Grants Commission [UGC]. (2020). *QAA guidelines for higher education institutions in Nepal*. UGC Nepal.
- University Grants Commission [UGC]. (2021). *Strategic plan for quality assurance and accreditation (QAA), 2021–2030*. Sanothimi, Bhaktapur: UGC Nepal.
- Upadhyay, T. R. (2018). Quality assurance in higher education: Policies and challenges in Nepal. *Tribhuvan University Journal*, 32(1), 1–16.
- World Bank. (2018). *Financing higher education in Nepal: Opportunities and challenges*. The World Bank Group.
- World Bank. (2020). *Implementation completion and results report on Nepal higher education reforms*. Washington, DC: The World Bank.
- World Bank. (2021). *Higher education reform in Nepal: Progress, challenges, and recommendations*. World Bank.



