Blended Learning in Nepalese Higher Education: A Qualitative Study of Current Practices and Emerging Trends

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Abstract

This study examines the evolving preferences of students and changes in the mode of teaching and learning over time, recognizing the need to address student demands for effective education. The primary objectives are to identify shifting student preferences regarding learning modes and to analyze the current practices and applied modalities of blended learning. specifically, the integration between face-to-face and online instruction.

Through a systematic review of literature and informal interviews, the study finds an increasing student attraction to blended learning, corresponding with a growth in the number of academic programs adopting this approach. Among the 11 observed universities(Acharya et al., 2022) , three have already launched academic programs in a blended mode, and all programs offered by Nepal Open University (NOU) are entirely blended structure. Due to the benefits of blended learning mode such as multisensory engagement and time flexibility. it is recommended that Nepalese universities need to prioritize the development of policies and programs related to extension of blended learning mode to effectively meet student demand and needs.

Keywords: higher education, blended learning, Nepal, Covid-19, information technology

Introduction

The history of education in Nepal dates back to ancient times and is deeply rooted in religious and cultural traditions. Early education was informal and centered on home-based instruction and Gurukul systems, especially within Hindu society, while Buddhist teachings were transmitted through Gumbas and Vihars. Over time, education gradually evolved from religious instruction to more structured forms, although it remained limited to certain segments of society. Formal education began during the Rana regime with the establishment of Durbar School in 1854, intended solely for the ruling elite. Higher education in Nepal also began during Rana regime with the establishment of Tri Chandra College half a century later in 1918. With the advent of democracy in 1950, the education system of Nepal developed

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profusely over the following several years spreading all over the country. Throughout the historical development of education system in Nepal the mode of teaching and learning has been solely face-to-face contact until 1957 when distance education was introduced by the College of Education by launching a 'Radio Education Program' for teacher training and promoting adult education (Pandey, 2021). Then, after the introduction of internet in Nepal in 1993, the country saw the continuous development and use of internet and Information and Communication Technology (ICT), which ultimately led Nepal government to establish Nepal Open University (NOU) in 2016 with the aim of expanding the access of higher education to those people who could not be reached by traditional mode of education. With the establishment of NOU, online education too started formally in Nepal (Poudyal 2020; Pandey 2021). However, Kathmandu University (KU), an autonomous and pioneer university, had already introduced online education in 2011. KU scholars have even claimed that the university started blended mode right from 2012 (Luitel et al., 2022). But it was not until the pandemic of COVID-19 that online learning became widespread and was practiced in several other universities and schools and colleges nationwide.

During several months' of lockdown forced by the pandemic, like many countries all over the world, Nepal also adopted online education as an alternative mode of teaching and learning. Via online means, teachers and students were able to connect and have virtual classes right from home. Mostly, Zoom, an online video conferencing platform, was used to have online classes at school level. Google Meet and Microsoft Teams were used by some of the professional institutions at higher education levels. The new practice of online learning brought both the surge of tremendous opportunities and challenges in Nepalese education system. Adhikari et al. (2025) observe, "The COVID-19 pandemic brought an extreme transition toward online education which offered new opportunities for creativity and expanded educational options. However, a number of challenges also came with this change" (p. 37). Some of the challenges faced both by the teachers and the students as identified by the authors are lack of internet access, limited access to essential technology, unfamiliarity with online classes, increased screen time, social isolation, etc. Poudel (2020) states that online learning is beneficial for "relatively more participation, flexibility, and depth of reflection" but points out its lack in "human connectivity and spontaneity, and that there might be procrastination in learning" (p. 2). He also expresses his doubt regarding the quality and quantity of learning "in asynchronous online technology-based learning because of the factors like delayed feedback, challenges in adjusting new technologies, low motivation of the learners to read online materials, and a burden of a large amount of information available to the learners to be absorbed independently" (p. 2). The online learning was forced by the pandemic-brought-lockdown as already mentioned above. Since it had several limitations and challenges of its own, as soon as the schools and colleges opened, face-to-face learning returned. However, as Nepalese teachers, students and educational institutions had already witnessed and experienced the immense possibilities of online learning, they have continued to make use of it ever since whenever necessary.

Presently, blended learning is an emerging mode of education at higher education level in Nepal. Rather than replacing the face-to-face and online learning, blended learning has combined the two to bring out something better. Simply put, "Blended learning is the thoughtful fusion of face-to-face and online learning experiences" (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008, p. 5). Face-to-face learning is the traditional way of learning where teacher and student must meet physically for the teaching-learning activity, whereas, online learning is a distance learning where meeting physically is not necessary as the teacher and the student are brought into contact via internet. The goal of blended learning is to integrate all aspects of the

teaching process with information technology. By doing so, it aims to create an optimal learning environment that helps students reach their educational objectives efficiently. There are advantages as well as disadvantages of both the face-to-face learning and online learning. If face-to-face learning has its strength in direct interaction, verbal as well as non-verbal, immediate feedback, and hands-on learning and practical training, online learning is beneficial for distance learning, flexibility of time and space, and wide resource availability. Blended learning combines the best of both these approaches as Garrison and Vaughan (2008) states, "Blended learning is a coherent design approach that openly assesses and integrates the strengths of face-to-face and online learning to address worthwhile educational goals" (p. x). According to Manna et. al. (2023), blended learning is "an effective combination of classroom activity and online learning through learning management system (LMS) learning platforms that students can access anywhere and anytime … providing educators greater flexibility and learners a more lavish experience" (pp. 19-20). They further state that "the use of coordinated instruction allows educators to be more creative in how they design and deliver activities, allowing them to incorporate new developments into their lessons" (p. 20) and "all of the necessary reading materials will be available online, allowing students to access whenever they want to refresh their memories, ensure they understand the content of the exercises, or look for additional, in-depth resources on a fascinating subject." (p. 20). The blended learning approach offers flexibility, is easy to access, helps students learn on their own, improves learning results, allows more interaction, and helps students understand the subject better. One of the most common benefits is that students can do the online part at their own speed, based on how they learn best (Wu & Luo, 2022). Hence, blended learning is not about replacing traditional face-to-face instruction with online learning, but about enhancing overall learning by making it more resourceful, collaborative, and engaging through the effective integration of online learning opportunities into traditional classroom settings.

In 2008, Garrison and Vaughan (2008) argued that the time had come "to reject the dualistic thinking that seems to demand choosing between conventional face-to-face and online learning, a dualism that is no longer tenable, theoretically or practically" (pp. 4-5) and to opt for blended learning as a better approach. They reasoned that "with the increasing awareness and adoption of the Internet and communications technology to connect learners, a more sensible way forward would be to better understand the potential of these technologies and how they might be integrated with the best of the face-to-face learning environment" (pp. 4-5). What Garrison and Vaughan said in 2008 is even truer today. In South Asian context, recently in 2023, Manna et al (2023) stated, "It is a combination of e-learning and traditional learning that is INCREASINGLY *[our emphasis]* accepted by educational institutions" (p. 19). Holding further technological advancement responsible for, they say that Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) technologies help students improve their focus and motivation by creating engaging, hands-on learning experiences. Various studies has shown that quality of learning at training can be enhanced through blended learning.(Alsalhi et al., 2021; de Brito Lima et al., 2021).

These tools shift the emphasis from theory to practical achievement, making learning more interactive and enjoyable. As a result, students become more curious and involved, and they can learn at their own pace (p. 25). They further write, "… it is hoped that in ten years, blended learning will be more popular than ever" (p. 24).

The Digital Nepal Framework (2019) emphasize digital integration as a critical aspect for the advancement of the education sector. Among its key focus areas are the introduction of smart classrooms, the development of online learning platforms, the adoption of

educational management information systems (EMIS), and the deployment of mobile learning centers in remote regions. Additionally, the shift toward digital education has become a central theme in Nepal's educational reforms, as reflected in various policy and strategy documents, including the Open Education and Distance Learning Policy 2007, the Directives on Distance Education/Open Learning Program 2007 (amended for the third time in 2014), the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in Education Master Plan 2013-2017 (Government of Nepal, Ministry of Education, Science and Technology - MoEST), and the Higher Education Policy Framework - 2018. The Education Policy Document of 2020 further reinforces this direction, stressing the need to transform the existing education system by improving teaching methodologies and accelerating ICT integration.(Ministry of Communication Information and Technology, 2019)(Department of Education and Skills, 2018)

Blended mode is practiced in higher education level. In Nepal, higher education refers to the level of education beyond grade 12 (National Education Policy of Nepal, 2019). So, Bachelor's level and above is considered as higher education in Nepal. These learners of higher education are adult learners. The blended mode is well-suited to adult learners, as they are generally expected to possess the necessary level of digital literacy, engage in independent study through online platforms, attend face-to-face sessions at campus when required, and take responsibility for all types of assignments.

As suggested by the literature, has blended learning been increasingly a mode of choice in higher education of Nepal? What are the current practices of blended mode of learning in Nepal? What are the applied modalities of integration between face-to-face learning and online learning? Are there any identifiable trends emerging in higher education of Nepal in relation to blended learning? are the key questions for the educational sector to answer.

Methodology

The information required for this research has been gathered through a review of relevant published literature and consultation of secondary sources, including institutional records and reports, blended learning guidelines, program curricula, and syllabuses. Additionally, informal conversations were held with selected authorities, teachers, and students involved in blended learning. The data thus obtained from secondary sources and informal conversations were analyzed using qualitative content and thematic analysis.

Results and Discussion

The following table presents a list of higher education programs currently running in blended mode in different universities of Nepal. It also informs on which year the program started from.

Table 1

Practice of blended teaching learning among universities in Nepal

University	Blended Program	Starting Date
Tribhuvan University	MESDP	2023
	PGDE	2080 BS
	MSSED	2021
Social Sciences and Education- Nepal Open University (NOU)	MPhil in Education (Education Studies, Nepali, English, Mathematics, Health)	2074
	MPhil in Social Sciences	2074

	(Political Sciences, Sociology, Economics, Anthropology, English)	
	Anthropology and English	2076
	One Year Masters of Pedagogical Sciences	2079
	Masters of Media and Communication Studies	2076
	Masters of Educational Sciences (Education Studies, English and Nepali)	2077
	One Year Bed (Subject Specific)	2076
	One Year Bachelor of Pedagogical Sciences (General)	2080
	4-Year Bachelor of Educational Sciences (English, Math, Social Studies)	2081
	4-Year Bachelor of Arts (English, Sociology, Economics, Library, Media, Political Sciences, Islamic Studies, Kirat Studies, Magar Studies, Tamang Studies)	2078
	Diploma in Library and Information Management	2074
Science, Health and Technology (NOU)	MPhil in Information and Communication Technology	2074
	Masters in e-governance	2074
	Masters in Geoinformatics	2075
	Masters in Natural Resource and Development	2076
	Masters of Science in Environmental and Occupational Health (EOH)	2076
	Master in Information Technology	2081
Management and Law (NOU)	PhD	2078
	MBA (Masters of Business Administration	2075
	MSDMG (MS in Development Management and Governance	2075
	L.L.B. (Bachelor of Law)	2075
	BBS (Bachelor of Business Sciences + Honours)	2075
KU	M.Ed.	2012

There are altogether 26 programs of higher education currently running in blended mode in Nepal. Most of the blended mode programs are launched by Nepal Open University

(NOU) followed by TU and KU. Gradual increment of academic programs by universities can be observed.

Blended Learning in Tribhuvan University

Tribhuvan University (TU) began blended learning from 2021. TU has been using an integrated system of Microsoft Teams and Moodle for online learning. Microsoft Teams supports video conferencing, while Moodle serves as the platform for managing learning activities. TU's blended programs are run in semester system. Each course in a semester has 3 credit hours, which is taught in altogether 16 weeks, with 3 hours of instruction every week. Face-to-face contact sessions are conducted for two weeks a semester – one at the beginning of the semester and another towards the end of the semester. In all other weeks classes are conducted online. In this way, one semester is divided between approximately 80% online classes and approximately 20% physical classes. Online classes are run in the evening, starting from usually 5:30 pm and continuing for around 3 hours, every Sunday to Friday. Since a course is taught for 3 hours a week, only one course is taught a day. Typical classroom strategy includes the following steps: pre-reading and reflection from the study, teacher's presentation, students' engagement and presentation, and sum-up of the class with the task for next week. Other in-class as well as out-of-class activities include collaboration between teacher and students and between students and students, group work and presentation, small scale research work, project work, seminar/workshop presentation, technology-integrated activities, reflective writing, independent studies, and guest lectures. The evaluation system is divided into 60% internal assessment and 40% external written examination. Internal assessment is done by the course facilitator on the basis of student's attendance, active participation, and assignments. For external assessment, written exam of 4 hours is conducted where course-related critical, analytical, and reflective type of questions are asked.

Blended Learning in Kathmandu University

Kathmandu University (KU) started blended learning in 2012 with an M.Ed. program. Since then, it has continuously run and extended its blended programs. It uses integrated form of Google Meet and Moodle for online learning. Google Meet facilitates video conferencing for online class and Moodle provides platform for study materials and assignment files sharing, uploads and downloads, etc. Each course in a semester carries 3 credit hours and is taught over a span of 16 weeks, with 3 hours of instruction per week. In a semester at least one week is taught via face-to-face mode, and all other weeks are taught via online mode. In this way, a semester is divided between approximately 90-80% online classes and 10-20% face-to-face classes. Online classes are run in the evening, starting from 4:30 or 5:30 pm and continuing for more or less 3 hours, every Sunday to Friday. Only one course is taught a day. Classes are conducted in highly interactive, engaging, and collaborative way. Facilitators usually provide students with materials for reading and make them share or give presentation on their understanding, and often assign them with reflective writings. Evaluation system is divided between in-semester assessment and end-semester assessment. 50-60% of weightage is given to in-semester assessment, whereas, 50-40% of weightage is given to end-semester assessment. In-semester assessment includes class attendance, active participation, and assignments like paper writing, reflective notes, journal writing, review paper, oral presentation, etc. The end-semester assessment is the final exam which occurs at the end of the semester. It involves project works, research works, review papers, journal writing, reflective notes, written tests, presentations, etc. The written tests are taken through open

book system, where students receive questions at a scheduled time via email or Moodle, consult the necessary materials and write the answers, and submit them within 24 hours or by the specified deadline. Plagiarism or cheating might be a problem in this system though strictly discouraged.

Emerging Trends

Kathmandu University School of Education (KUSOED), which launched its first online programs in 2011 with master's programs in educational management and leadership, states in its Teaching and Learning Guidelines in Blended Setting of 2023:

> Continually, teaching and learning have changed drastically from physical mode to online mode and now, with the post-Covid era, in blended mode. How to teach best in blended mode has been a topic of concern these days. Classes need to be interactive to make students engage in learning. For this, KUSOED has adopted an interactive teaching and learning approach in a blended mode, shifting teaching and learning from a teacher-centered approach to a student-centered approach. (p. 1)

The above narrative reveals two important things: the first thing is, the mode of education in Nepal has shifted from physical to online mode, and now to blended mode. This suggests that the blended learning is currently the emerging trend in the mode of learning. Secondly, the shift is from teacher-centered lecture approach to student-centered interactive approach. So, the next emerging trend is an increasingly student-centered approach.

Blended learning more clearly puts student at the center of learning. Reporting the case of Kathmandu University, Luitel et al. (2022) write, "Given the wide range of students, we teach in Nepal and beyond, it would seem impossible to personalize instruction to meet the needs of each student. Because of its hybrid nature, blended learning can be tailored to individual needs in terms of time, learning style, and other factors" (p. 5). For the people who live at distant places, traditional face-to-face learning, also known as on-campus learning, isn't possible. For them blended learning offers an opportunity. Today almost all students of blended learning in Nepal are those people who are engaged in some bread-earning profession either nearby university or far away, which makes it impossible for them to attend on-campus classes. The blended mode has enabled them to join the course because blended mode offers more than 80% of classes online. A week or two's on-campus classes are also scheduled in convenience with students' time: during the festival holidays between Dashain and Tihar, and during summer and winter vacations. In particular, teaching professionals who enjoy such holidays benefit from such student-convenient time schedules.

But why blended learning instead of online learning? One answer is provided by Aryal (2024), who writes:

> … the sudden switch to entirely online education and the isolation brought on by the strict lockdowns during the epidemic were difficult for me to adapt to. When the university began providing blended learning, it allowed us to attend smaller, in-person classes along with online resources …. The mixed approach provided us with the sense of connection that was lacking from exclusive online learning. (p. 157)

Thus, blended learning breaks the monotony of online classes and provides refreshment through direct human connection. Another need of blended learning is for

practical hands-on activities like in scientific experiments and while learning statistical software like SPSS, which is very difficult online. Additionally, blended learning might be useful for the final assessment of the students. Where there is provision of on-campus in-person exams for external assessment like in Tribhuvan University, there won't be room for doubts as in open book system.

Conclusion

The trend of blended learning in Nepalese higher education is shifting from traditional face-to-face instruction to online learning, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. Blended learning model integrates both physical and online modalities and gained popularity due to its flexibility, accessibility, and enhanced engagement. Universities like NOU, TU, and KU have adopted blended programs using platforms such as Moodle, Microsoft Teams, and Google Meet, with most instruction delivered through online. Key trends include a shift toward student-centered learning to increased use of digital tools like VR and AR, and strong policy support through national frameworks like Digital Nepal and ICT Master Plans.

Blended learning has been a transformative mode of pedagogy for Nepalese higher education, blending traditional and digital approaches to meet the shifting needs of adult learners. A growing popularity among universities represents a trend shift towards pedagogy that is student-centered, flexible, and more inclusive. With policy enablement and technical advancement, blended learning holds promise as a leading mode of pedagogy for Nepal, offering a tenable solution for expanding coverage and raising learning achievements.

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