

Localizing Quality: How TU-Affiliated Colleges and Policy Reforms Can Substitute for Overseas Study

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines if quality changes in Tribhuvan University (TU) affiliated campus in Nepal can be a meaningful alternative to foreign study and thereby mitigate the increasing student emigration from Nepal. The study is based on a qualitative phenomenological design and focuses on the lived experiences of 20 purposively selected students from three campuses affiliated to the TU in Koshi Province who chose to stay in Nepal to study at the bachelor level, despite being under high pressure to study abroad. The data were collected using Seidman's three-stage interview protocol and analyzed by using a constructivist paradigm. The results show that there are academic and psychological problems associated with perceived quality issues, social stigma and lack of employment opportunities for students who remain in Nepal after graduation. At the same time, those who experienced reformed academic environments, skill-based pedagogy, and career counseling were significantly more satisfied, more engaged in school, and had more positive self-concept. The study reveals the significant policy levers such as localization of curriculum, linkage with industries, and availability of scholarships and development of faculty as significant factors influencing the willingness of students to stay in Nepal for higher education. Recommendations are made for TU policy makers, campus administrators, and government education agencies.

Key concepts: *TU campuses, international study, localization, policy change, student results, psychological impacts, phenomenology*

Introduction

The world has been heading towards a new vision of a higher education dream in which high quality learning is perceived primarily as being overseas. In the Nepali context, this perception has evolved into a strong social currency, where studying abroad is now considered a sign of ambition, social status, and economic wisdom (Khadka, 2023). This belief has important implications. Over the last five decades, 54,000 students left Nepal for studying abroad during the first six months of this fiscal year alone, Wagle (2024) said.

Established in 1959, Tribhuvan University (TU) is the oldest and largest university in Nepal, and the source of all bachelor's degrees (Bajracharya, 2021). It has campuses in all seven provinces and hundreds of thousands of students attend them every year. But the university system has been criticized for offering courses that are not market-oriented, conducting examinations-based teaching and not establishing meaningful linkages with industry (Gaule, 2015; Ghimire et al., 2023). The structural weaknesses further contribute to the appeal of studying abroad and are a driver of the outflow of academically able young people from Nepal.

The discourse on student outmigration has been mostly about push factors such as poverty, unemployment, political instability, and poor governance of public institutions (Bista et al., 2019; Raby et al., 2020). Not much research has been done on the internal factors that could be developed, domestically, that might be able to replace the perceived advantages of going abroad and studying at a quality institution. The present study aims at filling this gap by examining the analytical issue.

The choice to go to Nepal for further studies is not without its psychological weight. For students who opt for domestic education, there are social narratives that suggest that this is a lack of ambition or a giving in to circumstance (Sharma, 2019). The mediation of these psychological pressures by institutional reform is important to understand in order to design retention-oriented policies. Dropout and outmigration are not just institutional problems, but personal experiences in social and economic contexts, as Veliz Palomino and Ortega (2023) note.

Based on this hypothesis, this paper argues that strategic and evidence-based reforms within the TU affiliated campuses can not only lead to an improvement in the quality of education but also to a better psychological experience for students who stay in Nepal, which can help to lower the structural incentive to migrate abroad. This study is based on the phenomenological approach to understand the lived experience of students in making this choice and provides policy recommendations based on the lived experience of the participants.

Research Questions

The following research questions are used to guide the study:

1. How do quality improvements in TU affiliated campuses affect the academic performance and mental health of students opting to stay in Nepal for further studies?
2. What are the students' perceptions of the benefits of studying abroad?

Literature Review

Higher Education Quality and Student Retention

The link between institutional quality and student retention has been well studied in both developed and developing country settings. The seminal Tinto (1987) model of student attrition suggests that the most important factors determining whether a student will stay in an institution or leave are his or her integration into the academic and social life of the institution. This model suggests that if institutions are not able to offer a meaningful academic engagement, a sense of belonging or a clear vocational trajectory, then students will drop out, either physically or geographically, through emigration.

Bajracharya (2021) states that the growth of higher education since the establishment of Tri-Chandra College in 1918 has not been accompanied by adequate enhancement of pedagogical quality. In 1983, the multi-university approach was introduced, which expanded the institutional diversity but failed to address the core conflict between access and quality (Gaule, 2015). Rote learning and final examinations have been found to be a challenge to deep

learning and employability in TU's examination-oriented culture (Mathema, 2007).

Policy Reforms and Curriculum Localization

The Curriculum localization is a concept that means curriculum content should be linked to the economic, cultural and labor market realities of the national context. One of the main motivations for taking a foreign education is the belief that the domestic education system is not relevant to the needs of the global labor market (Ghimire et al., 2023). This irrelevancy is partially structural, since the revision cycle of the TU curriculum has been slow, and certain parts of the curriculum have not changed for more than a decade (Gaule, 2015).

Such gaps have been identified in recent policy documents such as the Higher Education Policy (2076 BS) and TU's Strategic Plan (2079-2083 BS) and have been recommended to be addressed through various mechanisms such as introducing outcome-based education, credit transfer systems, and incorporating soft skills into the curriculum. But it is a question that is empirical, whether these policy intentions become reality in the classroom, and the present study is a beginning towards answering it.

Psychological Dimensions of the Study Abroad Decision

This course examines the psychological factors related to the study abroad decision. The psychological study migration literature can be divided into motivational and coping components. Motivationally, studying abroad is often described as students' beliefs about their own self-efficacy, where students who feel their domestic institutions cannot equip them with the competence will be more inclined to look for foreign alternatives (Bandura, 1997; Poudel & Baral, 2021). In coping terms, students who continue to stay in Nepal despite the social pressure to leave use a variety of coping strategies such as reframing domestic study as a pragmatic choice, building peer support networks, and using identity as rooted in family obligation (Antonio, 2001). Well-being and academic engagement go hand-in-hand, as students who feel socially connected and academically stimulated are more likely to stay in

school (Panek & Johnson, 2022). On the other hand, if students feel that their potential is not recognised or developed in the institution, they are at a higher risk of dropping out and outmigration. The theoretical and practical importance of the mediating effect of campus-based interventions (career counseling, mentorship, skill-based learning) on institutional alienation is thus significant.

Foreign Employment and the Opportunity Cost of Domestic Education

Any Foreign employment and study is a formidable competitor in any consideration of domestic higher education reform. Nepal's labor migration system is structurally entrenched: IFAD (2023) found that almost half of all Nepali households have at least one member in labor migration or who have returned from overseas employment. According to the ILO (2016), foreign employment is the largest driving force for international migration from Nepal, and the number of people who migrate to work abroad is over 450,000 per year (NPC, 2017).

Students are not just comparing the universities in their country with those abroad, but the entire journey that each one entails. Regardless of the financial risk, foreign study is perceived as a gateway to the world of work, foreign currency remittance and social status (Sharma, 2019). Domestic education, on the other hand, is linked with uncertain jobs in a constrained labor market (Tiwari et al., 2016). It is unlikely that policy changes which do not take this structural imbalance in results into account will have much impact on the incentive to study overseas.

Research Methodology

This study is of qualitative phenomenological in nature, following the methodological approach laid down by Seidman (2013) and further developed in the context of higher education in Nepal by Magar and Gautam (2025). Phenomenology is well suited here because the main research questions are related to the subjective lived experience of students' navigating through complex institutional and social environments, which cannot be fully captured with quantitative instruments (Frechette et al., 2020).

The participants were purposively selected from three campuses of the TU namely Mechi Multiple Campus (Mechi), Biratnagar Multiple Campus (Morang) and Dharan Multiple Campus (Sunsari) in Koshi Province with 20 participants. The participants were selected on the basis that they had made a conscious decision to study in Nepal for their bachelor's degree, even though they had realistic opportunities to study abroad, i.e., appeared in or had the chance to take foreign language proficiency tests or the documentation process for labor migration. From five academic programs, two students were selected from each program (BBS, B.Ed, BSc, BA, and BCA).

Data was gathered using Seidman's three stages of the interview process. The first interview was about the participant's life story and educational journey. The second interview focused on the specifics of their present educational experience, such as their perceptions of the quality of the institutions, pedagogical practices, and campus environment. In the third interview, participants were asked to consider their experience in the context of higher education in Nepal and their own development. Interviews were conducted in Nepali and English, depending on the participants' preference, and recorded with informed consent and then transcribed and member checked.

A constructivist paradigm was adhered throughout the research process as knowledge about educational experience is co-constructed between researcher and participant (Creswell, 2009). Prolonged engagement with participants, triangulation of data sources (including institutional documents), peer debriefing and maintenance of a reflexivity journal during the fieldwork period (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Sandelowski, 1993) were used to establish trustworthiness.

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of this phenomenological study was achieved by four criteria identified by Sandelowski (1993) and developed by Khalid Ahmad (2024) namely credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability. To ensure credibility, the researchers conducted lengthy contact with participants throughout three interview phases and member

checked emergent themes. In order to ensure transferability, thick description of the institutional and social context was included so that the reader can evaluate the findings for their applicability to similar campus institutions related to the TU.

The procedures for data collection and analysis were carefully documented, and an audit trail of coding decisions and thematic development were maintained to ensure dependability. Conformability was dealt with by conducting peer debriefing with colleagues from institutions other than the researchers' own campus, and reducing interpretive bias. The researchers' dual role as teaching staff in the TU system was recognized as important for both insight and possible bias and reflexivity was therefore maintained.

Research Findings and Analysis

The findings from the research are presented based on the two research questions. The first section of the paper provides an analysis of the theme of the participants' experiences of the quality of domestic higher education and the reforms they saw as meaningful. The second section considers the participants' conceptions of the link between their decision to stay in Nepal and their mental health. Names of participants have been changed throughout.

Perceived Quality of Reformed Academic Environments

One major observation in each of the three campuses was that respondents could clearly differentiate between the 'traditional' and 'reformed' academic settings. Passive lecture delivery, rote-memorization assessment, and minimal faculty-student interaction were the hallmarks of traditional environments. Reformed environments, on the other hand, were linked to active learning, project-based assessment, and teachers who were mindful of current professional settings.

Nabin, a third year BBS student at Biratnagar Multiple Campus, said that his experience was based on a faculty development program: The class used to be like a reading to before. The teacher comes, reads from notes and goes away. Once the new program commenced, we started conducting case studies of businesses in Nepal. I began to feel that the things I

learned had some relevance to what I would do upon graduation. That turned my attitude around.

This change in pedagogy, in similar terms expressed by several participants, is in line with the literature on constructivist learning environments (Creswell, 2009), and aligns with the opinion that curriculum reform can have concrete impacts on student motivation and academic identity. Campus participants who attended industry visits and guest lectures by professionals had significantly higher perceptions of the relevance of the curriculum.

Scholarship Accessibility and Financial Confidence

The Twelve of the 20 participants emphasized that the scholarship system at the campuses affiliated to TU was a major factor in their decision to stay in Nepal. The experiences described were often mixed, however, as Magar and Gautam (2025) report, although there was recognition of the availability of scholarships, there was also a sense of opacity in the allocation process. As a second year B.Ed. student of Mechi Multiple Campus, Kamala explained the twofold experience:

The scholarship enabled me to come to study here. If it weren't for it, my parents would not have been able to cope. However, the way to get it was so opaque. You apply, go for an interview, and then you wait and no one tells you anything. It finally arrived and I was relieved, not grateful as I had ceased to believe it would.

This testimony is part of a conclusion that can be drawn from many others: The psychological effect of financial support is clearly moderated by its openness and regularity. Students who received their scholarships in a timely and predictable fashion were more likely to report a degree of trust in the institution and were more academically engaged, while those who experienced delays in receiving their scholarships and/or had no explanation regarding the reasons their scholarships were not disbursed reported a level of anxiety and less engagement with their studies.

Career Counseling and Vocational Identity Formation

One of the most common experiences cited for the reform was involvement in career counseling programs that were established at one of the

three campuses, as part of a pilot project. Eight of the participants from that campus said that these sessions had a transformative impact on their self-understanding as future professionals.

Sushil, a final year BSc student, said, “We were impressed by the dedication of our teachers and the dedication of the students.

I never gave it much thought as to what type of work I wanted to do. I wanted a job but I didn't have a vision for it. Once the counseling sessions began, I began to visualize myself in a particular role. I started to relate my studies with my possibilities. I think that's what a lot of these students here are missing is that sense of direction.

Vocational identity development in the developmental literature has been well documented in the psychological literature (Lowe & Dotterer, 2018; Koirala, 2023). The findings of how career counseling in the campus can trigger this developmental process of Nepali bachelor level students have implications for the institutional programming, as lack of career counseling is often stated as a reason for going for foreign opportunities.

Social Stigma and Psychological Resilience.

One important theme that emerged from the participant stories was the social stigma attached to the decision to stay in Nepal for further education. In communities where foreign employment and foreign study was expected of the ambitious young man, the choice of attending a local TU campus was often seen as a sign of weakness or situation.

As a third-year BA student, Ritu shared her experience with social dimension with great honesty:

All of my cousins are in Korea or Australia. During festivals, the family discusses what they have earned and their experiences. The only thing I get asked about at the moment is my studies. You don't feel you're doing poorly at school, only that you're not doing well. I have learnt not to be affected by it, but it took time. Much help was provided by the friends I made on campus. If it wasn't for them, I would have left I suppose.

This example is a good example of how social context, peer support and psychological resilience can be intertwined. The participants who were high in

academic and social integration in the campus community were high in psychological stability under social pressure from the outside environment. The results support Antonio's (2001) framework of the protective nature of friendship networks for academic persistence, and highlight the need for campus community building as a retention strategy.

Perceptions of Post-Graduation Employability.

Long-term calculations involved in the overseas study decision are all about employability and economic security. The participants always judged the quality of domestic higher education based on the results of its study. Those who had envisioned that their TU qualification could lead them to a meaningful career were much more satisfied with their choice of staying in Nepal.

This calculation was explained by a BCA student, Prakash, who had declined an opportunity to study Korean for his degree:

I made a bet. The one thing I told myself is that if I find my job in IT within 6 months of getting out of this college, this is the one I should have chosen. Last year there was the establishment of a placement cell in the campus. They got three companies to come and recruit. I have two of my senior colleagues placed. That gave me the feeling that my wager wasn't a foolish one.

This testimony emphasizes the importance of industry-campus relationships in transforming institutional change into individual benefit. The ILO (2023) has pointed out that one of the key factors in Nepal's ability to keep skilled youth is the absorptive capacity of the domestic economy. Although small in scale, campus placement programmes are a significant link between institutional reform and students' economic goals.

Conclusion

The aim of this phenomenological study is to investigate the lived experiences of twenty students of the TU who opted to stay in Nepal to study at the bachelor level despite the strong social and economic pull towards studying abroad. The results show that although structural issues of relevance

in curriculum, administration of scholarship and post-graduation employment are still important sources of student dissatisfaction and attrition, targeted interventions in these areas have positive measurable effects on academic engagement, psychological well-being, and vocational identity.

The study is useful in a field of higher education research studies in Nepal that is relatively under-researched: the experience of staying on. To provide reforms that can be considered psychologically sustainable and academically fulfilling for this population, it is important to know what factors create a psychologically viable and academically rewarding experience for domestic students.

The results indicate that the central issue for TU and its affiliated campuses is not just curricular but institutional and cultural, and that it involves creating spaces where students feel that they are needed, cared for, and their future is visible. In places where these conditions are present, in part, students exhibit a remarkable resistance to the social forces that push them to out-migrate. If they're not there, even affluent students can end up saying goodbye.

Implications

The following implications were suggested to the attention of the campus administrators, TU policymakers and Ministry of Education, Science and Technology:

1. Career Counseling programs must be institutionalized at all TU campuses, and staffed with trained personnel and must be part of the academic calendar and not an add-on item.
2. The curriculum revision process should follow a participatory approach, engaging students, faculty and industry, and have a minimum revision period of three years with the aim of keeping the curriculum relevant to the changing needs of the industry.
3. Scholarship administration will be all electronic and clear, time limits will be clearly defined, selection criteria will be advertised, and there will be grievance redressal procedures for all applicants.

4. Industry-campus linkage programmes such as internships, mentorship programmes, placement cells etc. should be given budgets in the campus and institutional recognition in quality assurance mechanism of TU.
5. Faculty development programmes should emphasize active learning approaches, and introduce local case studies into the regular course teaching.
6. Supportive services to assist students who are experiencing social pressures as a result of their choice to study at a domestic university should be established, including peer mentoring networks and academic counselling.
7. The central administration of TU needs to develop a communications strategy to actively promote positive social narratives of the success of domestic pathways to challenge negative narratives.

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