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Coping Strategies of Teachers and Students in Addressing Teaching-Learning Challenges within the Semester System at Mid-West University

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Abstract

Background: The semester system, with its emphasis on continuous student assessment and learner-centred approaches, is the most widely used in higher education institutions worldwide. In Nepal, the semester system was introduced in the 1970s at Tribhuvan University, and many other universities, including Mid-West University, have since adopted it from the outset. However, little is known about the challenges encountered in its implementation in newly formed public universities in Nepal, particularly in remote regions.

Objective: This study aims to explore the challenges encountered and coping strategies adopted in implementing the semester system at Mid-West University, Surkhet, Nepal, with the aim of contributing to the development of the educational system.

Methods: This study used the narrative research method, in which five teachers and five students from five different graduate schools, including the Management, Humanities and Social Sciences, Education, Science and Technology, and Engineering, were selected through the purposeful sampling method. In-depth interviews were used as the primary means of data collection in November 2021, and the data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis.

Findings: Five themes were identified, including curriculum-practice mismatch, infrastructure and resource constraints, ICT skills, time pressure, and adaptive self-reliance.

Conclusion: This study concluded that implementing the semester system smoothly is affected by various challenges, including curriculum, infrastructure, technology, and assessment load, which need to be addressed in the overall development of the educational system.

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Novelty: This is the first study to explore the challenges of implementing the semester system and the coping strategies used to address them at Mid-West University, Nepal, in the Karnali province.

Keywords: Assessment load, coping strategies, curriculum challenges, higher education, semester system

1. Introduction

The term 'semester' derives from the Latin 'sementris,' meaning 'half of a year' or 'one of two academic divisions' (Dahal, 2018).' The semester system divides the academic year into two six-month terms, aiming to enhance student learning through continuous assessment and a learner-centered approach (TU Guideline, 2013). This system is widely regarded as innovative and is adopted in higher education for its emphasis on interactive, modern teaching methods, including the use of ICT tools worldwide. While it offers numerous advantages, such as increased student engagement and continuous assessment, it also presents challenges, including student irregular attendance, large class sizes, and inadequate resources.

In Nepal, the semester system was first introduced at Tribhuvan University in the 1970s, but it did not last long. It was reintroduced at Tribhuvan University in 2014 (TU Today, 2014). Other Nepalese universities, such as Kathmandu University, Far Western University, and Mid-West University, have been running their academic programs under the semester system since their inception. However, researchers have reported only challenges and some other aspects of this system, including a lack of academic calendars and fair evaluations.

This study examines the challenges faced and coping strategies adopted by teachers and students at Mid-West University in Surkhet, Nepal. This study aimed to identify challenges to the effective implementation of the semester system and the specific coping strategies adopted by teachers and students to resolve them. Despite the global adoption of the semester system, particularly in developed countries like Nepal, there is a significant gap in understanding its application and challenges within Nepalese universities, such as Mid-West University. Mid-West University is a newly established public university in Karnali, a remote region of Nepal. The study's findings provide valuable insights for its key stakeholders, including teachers, students, curriculum designers, book authors, and policymakers, interested in enhancing the educational framework through the semester-based system.

2. Review of Literature

There are a few studies on the semester system in academia, though the system is much more popular in the South Asian context (Sharma, 2016). Akhtar (1980) assessed the implementation of the semester system in some selected Indian universities through a descriptive survey of 583 students and 363 teachers across 10 institutions. The study found that teachers valued the system's benefits for assessing student performance and its adaptable teaching methods. Both teachers and students expressed positive attitudes toward the system, particularly regarding continuous internal assessments that promote student academic improvement. Chongbang (2014) compared the semester and annual systems at Tribhuvan University, revealing that

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practical differences outweigh policy ones, with higher pass rates in the semester system. Similarly, Bhutia & Subba (2015) evaluated the semester system in Sikkim colleges, highlighting benefits such as continuous evaluation and improved student performance, but also challenges such as large class sizes and unfair assessments. Sharma (2016) carried out a meta-analysis of the implementation of the semester system in South Asia, finding mixed results and no consensus on its efficacy. Pandit (2016) explored satisfaction in mathematics education across both systems, finding no significant difference in student satisfaction levels. Pokharel et al. (2018) evaluated perceptions among teachers and students in agriculture, noting notable dissatisfaction with class regularity. Dahal (2018) assessed student perceptions of the MBS semester system, which were largely positive except for campus facilities. Sardar et al. (2019) identified key satisfaction factors in Pakistani universities, particularly the role of teachers. Similarly, Acharya et al. (2023) analyzed mathematics teaching and learning in Nepal's semester system, involving three teachers, six Master of Education students from Tribhuvan University, and input from 21 students through focused group discussions. Their study indicates notable shifts in pedagogical practices, supported by an evaluation system focused on holistic learner development.

In summary, these studies indicate that while the semester system has advantages, it also faces implementation and satisfaction challenges across various contexts. Despite a few studies on the semester system in the South Asian context, no research has examined the challenges faced by students and teachers in this system and offered recommendations to address them at Mid-West University. Therefore, this study is distinct from earlier studies.

3. Methods

The study used a qualitative research design through a narrative inquiry approach. The research was conducted across five graduate schools: Management, Humanities and Social Sciences, Education, Science and Technology, and Engineering, involving five teachers and five students purposively selected from both bachelor's and master's programs studying in different semesters. Two distinct interview guidelines were devised to elicit narratives of both teachers' and students' experiences of challenges and coping strategies in the semester system.

Interviews were conducted via Zoom or in person at their convenience in November 2021. Recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were thoroughly read multiple times to thematically analyze them following Braun and Clarke (2006), with the analysis aligned with the research questions. Therefore, interview transcripts were thoroughly read to identify codes, which were organized into five categories/themes. To ensure the authenticity of the research findings, quality standards were maintained, including validation through participant collaboration, member checking, and triangulation of data sources. Ethical considerations were prioritized by informing participants about the study's objectives, ensuring that data usage was solely for academic purposes, and obtaining written informed consent. Additionally, strong measures were taken to maintain confidentiality, prevent any harm to participants, and maintain principles of objectivity and honesty during data analysis.

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4. Results

This section presents the results of qualitative data collected from teachers and students regarding the challenges they faced in implementing the semester system and the coping strategies they adopted to address them. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis aimed to identify recurring patterns of meaning across the transcripts and to generate themes or categories that reflect shared experiences of both teachers and students.

Through a systematic process of familiarisation with the data, coding, theme generation, review, and refinement, five themes emerged. These themes represent common challenges and coping strategies used by teachers and students in the university's semester system.

Theme 1: Curriculum–Practice Mismatch

This theme captures teachers' and students' shared challenges regarding the misalignment between curriculum design and the practical requirements of the semester system. Both teachers and students reported that the existing curricula were outdated, theory-oriented, lengthy, and not designed keeping the semester system in mind. Moreover, the absence of needs analysis, limited practical components, repetition of content, and weak vertical and horizontal linkage across various semesters were identified as significant curricular challenges. Teachers reported difficulty completing the courses within limited timeframes, often forcing them to prioritize selected themes from an examination perspective. Students also expressed dissatisfaction with theoretical overload and the lack of contextually relevant, locally relevant content in their curriculum.

T1 expressed her dissatisfaction with teaching outdated content in a course to her students, as:

> I have been teaching a course with outdated, irrelevant content for the last 7 years. For example, I teach a graduate-level course that uses village development committees in Nepal as a unit of study. At present, there are no more village development committees in Nepal. The country has already shifted to a federal system and has an urban-rural municipality system. Then, what is the point of teaching my students about village development committees? Some other units in the course are outdated as well.

Students also faced a similar type of curricular challenges as S1 noted: "The university has not updated its curriculum for the last 7 years. Due to rapid advances in science and technology, education and pedagogy are also changing rapidly. However, we are still studying an old curriculum."

To address the curriculum-practice mismatch faced by both teachers and students, the teachers used various coping strategies, including selective teaching, detailed course outlines,

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updated online materials, student presentations, content contextualization, and teacher-student consultation, to make courses more relevant and manageable within the semester system.

In this regard, T2 shared his experience of using the strategy for handling problems related to the curriculum from his perspective as:

> If I cannot find the prescribed textbooks and reference materials for my course in the library or on the market, I use search engines such as Google and Google Scholar to find related research articles, books, research reports, PowerPoint slides, and other resources. In the classroom, I generally use the latest research articles, books, and reports to provide students with up-to-date knowledge. I try my best to use current, relevant, and practical content in my teaching.

Similarly, T3 shared his coping strategy with his course contents to make them more relevant and contextual as follows:

> I generally prepare a detailed course plan for each course to customize the syllabi and use several modern teaching-learning tools to support students' learning. My focus is always on imparting the latest knowledge, skills, and attitudes to students in their disciplines. To support students' learning, I prepare class lectures, PPT slides, and handouts, and sometimes compile course packages and provide them to students. I also use locally available resources for my teaching.

Moreover, T4 reported his unique way of solving the problems related to course completion within the stipulated time in the semester system as:

> If the course is lengthy and I have a short time, I focus on the main themes and try to be selective in my delivery to complete it on time. Sometimes I also assign students individual and group presentations on the assigned topics, which helps me finish the course on time.

In summary, the teachers adopted various strategies to address challenges they observed in the curriculum. For example, they browsed teaching materials using various search engines such as Google. To facilitate students' learning, they also prepared class notes and PPT slides and compiled reading materials. Some of the teachers tried to be selective in their teaching and assigned students to give presentations to cover the lengthy content in a short period of time.

Theme 2: Infrastructure and Resource Constraints

This theme reflects challenges about inadequate physical, technological, and academic resources. Both teachers and students reported inadequate copies of textbooks in the library, poor internet connectivity, frequent power cuts, a lack of multimedia projectors, overcrowded classrooms, and inadequate learning spaces.

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T5 shared his experience of employing his strategies to solve the problem related to preparing and using teaching materials, such as:

> Depending on the nature of the teaching materials, I generally prepare them at home in advance. I collect required pictures from old books, newspapers, and magazines; samples of letters and photos related to the teaching items from magazines, and use them in teaching. So, I manage my own teaching materials and do not depend on my graduate school.

Teachers often relied on personal devices like mobile phones and laptops, mobile data, and self-prepared materials to conduct their classes. Students also reported depending on lecture notes, shared materials, and online resources to compensate for the lack of institutional support.

In this regard, S1 narrated his story as:

> The number of students in compulsory subjects is high, so classes are often crowded, noisy, and congested. Because the classes are large, teachers do not have time to give individual attention to every student and struggle to use a student-centered approach. As a result, we cannot carry out many activities prescribed by the curriculum.

Similarly, S2 shared his story as:

> For me, the most challenging aspects of the semester system are the lack of well-equipped infrastructure, the outdated library, and the availability of resources. Classrooms should have sufficient benches, desks, podiums, and multimedia projectors. Similarly, the library should have a sufficient number of textbooks, journals, and reference materials, including an e-library facility. Moreover, I think the campus should have sufficient daily-use teaching materials, such as board markers, dusters, multimedia projectors, extension cords, and photocopy machines.

These narratives indicate that the effective implementation of the semester system is significantly hindered by infrastructural limitations, shifting responsibility from institutions to individuals.

Theme 3: ICT Skill Gaps and Digital Adaptation

The third theme highlights challenges in integrating ICT into teaching and learning. Both teachers and students acknowledged limited technical skills among students and teachers, a lack of ICT-friendly classrooms, ineffective online interaction, and economic barriers to accessing digital tools.

T4 shared his experience of not being able to adopt ICT in his teaching as:

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> I am not good with ICT tools for educational purposes. I want to share an anecdote about my limited knowledge and skills in using ICT in my classroom. In fact, I had a very bitter experience using online teaching platforms to run virtual classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. When physical classes were suspended due to the lockdown, the administration asked teachers to facilitate classes virtually. At that time, I did not know how to create and run virtual classes, so I could not teach my students online for about 10 days. I was really upset about it. Later, one of my students helped me open a Zoom account and run online classes. Only then could I survive in my teaching career.

Similarly, T5 expressed his experience as that of Teacher 4: "I am poor at using ICT tools in my teaching. I do not even have a laptop computer. Moreover, my classroom does not have a computer or a multimedia projector."

Another teacher (T3) narrated his experience as follows: "I provide support to my students who struggle with using ICT tools in the classroom. When they ask for help, I assist them in using ICT tools."

Teachers described learning ICT skills through trial and error, peer support, students' assistance, and online tutorials. Students reported gradual adaptation, peer collaboration, and self-learning as key strategies for coping with digital challenges.

T2 also has a similar experience regarding ICT knowledge and skills. He noted as:

> I use an alternative power supply and mobile data for the Internet to run online classes from home. When I face problems with ICT tools, I consult an IT expert. Sometimes, I get help from my colleagues and students. I also try to find solutions using Google and YouTube. I search for and download teaching materials whenever I have access to the Internet, whether at home or away.

Despite initial difficulties, ICT use was increasingly viewed as a necessary component of the semester system, albeit inadequately supported.

Theme 4: Time Pressure, Assessment Load, and Behavioural Challenges

This theme includes challenges related to continuous assessment, time management, and classroom discipline. Teachers reported issues such as irregular attendance, late assignment submissions, plagiarism, and a lack of student preparedness. Students highlighted heavy workloads, frequent assessments, and difficulty balancing academic responsibilities with their employment.

S4 shared her concerns regarding time pressure and assessment load in the semester system, as:

> I think the most challenging aspect of the semester system is time management. As students, we should attend classes regularly, complete all assignments on time,

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submit them, give presentations, sit for midterms and final examinations, and so on. So, we have a hard time managing our time for studying. For those of us who have part-time jobs, this system is tough. I think even the teachers should spend more time in the semester system compared to the annual system. They should prepare for their upcoming classes, check and provide feedback on students' assignments, examine students' test papers, guide or supervise students' theses, and so on.

S5 reported that he is tired of assessment tools in the semester system.

I am fed up with the many assessment tasks in the semester system. We are evaluated through a number of techniques continuously throughout the semester. The major assessment techniques include attendance records, take-home assignments, midterms, individual and group presentations, project work, classwork, report writing, note-taking, active participation in class, unit tests, question construction, and problem-solving tasks.

Coping strategies included flexible deadlines for assignment submission, peer learning, selective study practices, teacher follow-up mechanisms, and student task prioritization.

Theme 5: Adaptive Self-Reliance amid Weak Institutional Support

This theme reflects a shared perception that while the semester system is modern and innovative, its implementation is weak. Both teachers and students pointed to administrative inefficiencies, lax adherence to the academic calendar, limited teacher incentives, and inconsistent enforcement of rules. Both teachers and students demonstrated adaptive self-reliance by investing personal resources, engaging in informal collaboration, and adjusting expectations to sustain the system.

T2 reported his experience of teaching students even on holidays as: "The course I teach in the third semester is lengthy. There are eight units. Since I must complete the course within five months, I teach even on Saturdays and other holidays."

T4 shared his experience developing his own resources for classroom use as:

The course I teach in the second semester is compulsory. No single book covers the entire course. Even two or three books do not cover all the units, and they are not directly related to the course. So, I have developed my own teaching materials aligned with the course of study. I distribute my handouts to students.

To sum up, teachers and students face interrelated academic, infrastructural, technological, and administrative challenges in the semester system. Their coping strategies largely depend on individual initiative rather than institutional mechanisms, underscoring the need for systemic reform in the semester system.

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5. Discussion

The section presents how the study both confirms and extends existing research.

5.1 Curriculum–Practice Mismatch and the Semester System

The study's results show a clear disconnect between how the curriculum is designed and the way the semester system actually operates. Both teachers and students reported that curricula of different disciplines are more theoretical, lengthy, poorly sequenced, and developed without a systematic needs analysis. Similar issues have been reported in studies on the implementation of the semester system, where curriculum rigidity undermines flexibility and learner-centered pedagogy (Bista, 2016). The dominance of theoretical content over practical, locally relevant knowledge reflects a broader challenge in higher education reform, in which curricular revision often lags behind changes in assessment and academic calendars.

5.2 Infrastructure and Resource Constraints in Higher Education Reform

Aligning with prior research, the study reveals that inadequate infrastructure and limited academic resources remain significant challenges to the effective implementation of the semester system at an educational institution. Issues such as unreliable internet connectivity, frequent power interruptions, insufficient ICT equipment, overcrowded classrooms, and a lack of textbooks have been documented in similar studies conducted in Nepal (Sherpa & Baraily, 2022; Poudel, 2022; Neupane, 2023).

5.3 ICT Integration, Digital Divide and Adaptive Learning

The study's findings on ICT use highlight a persistent gap between policy aspirations and classroom practice. While ICT integration is considered central to modern higher education, both teachers and students reported limited ICT skills, a lack of ICT-friendly classrooms, and ineffective online interaction. These findings are consistent with studies on the "digital divide" in higher education, which suggest that access to technology alone is insufficient without adequate training and institutional support (Pathak & Rahman, 2013; UNESCO, 2020; Neupane, 2023).

5.4 Time Pressure, Continuous Assessment and Academic Behaviour

The semester system's priority on continuous assessment was perceived as pedagogically valuable yet academically demanding. In line with existing research, the findings indicate that frequent assessments increase workload, time pressure, and stress for both teachers and students. Completing the course within a limited time frame is challenging (Subedi, 2019), and the workload is increased by many assessments (Munshi, Javed, & Hussain, 2012). Issues such as irregular attendance, late assignment submissions, rote learning, and plagiarism further complicate assessment practices.

6. Conclusion

The paper revealed that outdated, theory-laden curricula create time-management issues, encouraging selective teaching and reliance on online resources. Similarly, limited physical and ICT resources require personal initiative. Both teachers and students address limited digital skills through self-study and peer collaboration. Heavy workloads from assessments strain time management, prompting the adoption of flexible deadlines and peer-learning strategies.

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Teachers and students demonstrate adaptability through personal investment and collaboration despite administrative inefficiencies. These findings highlight interconnected academic, infrastructural, and technological challenges, underscoring the need for systemic reform in curriculum development and in the accessibility of educational resources. However, the university has now begun revising and redesigning its old curricula to align with a labour-market-driven project to meet the demands of contemporary society. Similarly, many classrooms are well furnished, and a central library building is under construction. Polices and guidelines have been formulated to regulate the effective implementation of the semester system in its true spirit. A training unit has been set up to train its faculty members and administrative staff on various aspects of curriculum, teaching-learning, assessment, and administrative and accountancy matters. This study recommends strict adherence to the academic calendar, the integration of ICT-based resources, and the use of other resources, including textbooks and reference materials. Therefore, the university should a) revise and redesign all courses aligning with the labour-market-driven project to produce trained and competent manpower for the society; b) develop and fund a centralised digital resource hub and ICT training program; c) reform assessment policies and guidelines to balance continuous evaluation with manageable workloads.

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