

Practice and Policy Implications of Quality Assurance and Accreditation: A Review

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ABSTRACT

Nepal's higher education sector has expanded significantly since the 1990s; however, this growth has not been paralleled by improvements in institutional quality, governance, or accountability. But this increase has not been matched by better institutional quality, governance, or accountability. The University Grants Commission (UGC) of Nepal came up with the Quality Assurance and Accreditation (QAA) system in 2007 to deal with these problems. Following PRISMA 2020 guidelines, a systematic review was conducted using sources from Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, UGC Nepal databases, and institutional repositories. We chose 42 research, including peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents, and institutional reports published between 2005 and 2024, based on certain criteria and then used the CASP and GRADE rating frameworks to rate them. We used NVivo software to code and analyze the themes. Only 3% of Nepal's colleges and universities were completely accredited as of 2024. Nepal lags behind when it comes to making ensuring that quality assurance is in line with performance indicators, outcome-based education, and participatory government. This shift from symbolic accreditation to progressive, participatory QA is particularly crucial for making higher education more trustworthy, helping graduates find jobs, and giving Nepalese higher education institutions a bigger role in the country's growth. The results are particularly essential for politicians, academic leaders, and quality assurance professionals who wish to make big improvements to Nepal's higher education system.

Keywords: quality assurance, accreditation, higher education, international benchmarks, systematic review

Introduction

Higher education in Nepal has experienced significant growth since the 1990s, largely driven by the restoration of multiparty democracy and subsequent liberalization policies (Mathema, 2007; Upadhyaya, 2018). These changes in politics and the economy made it possible for communal,

private, and semi-autonomous public institutions to form. This changed the higher education landscape in both rural and urban areas. Some of the most well-known universities in Nepal, such as Tribhuvan University (TU), Pokhara University, and Purbanchal University, have grown and now serve a wide range of students from all parts of



the country and different social and economic backgrounds.

Despite the growing number of higher education institutions (HEIs) in Nepal, this expansion has not been accompanied by corresponding improvements in quality, equity, or governance. Structural challenges continue to undermine the credibility and competitiveness of Nepalese HEIs both regionally and internationally. Key issues include outdated curricula misaligned with national qualification frameworks and labor market needs, weak governance plagued by political interference and a lack of strategic planning, limited faculty development and research productivity, inadequate infrastructure with significant digital gaps, and ineffective quality assurance mechanisms. These shortcomings raise serious concerns about the academic rigor of programs, the employability of graduates, and the global recognition of Nepalese degrees.

The University Grants Commission (UGC) of Nepal started the Quality Assurance and Accreditation (QAA) system in 2007 to deal with these problems. Introduced as part of a larger reform effort to increase academic standards and foster a culture of continual improvement throughout Nepalese HEIs, the QAA system The QAA approach has three parts: self-assessment by the institution, peer review from outside the institution, and accreditation based on standardized performance standards (UGC, 2013; QAHE, 2023). This process puts a lot of stress on openness, getting input from stakeholders, and learning based on evidence.

The QAA framework in Nepal evaluates higher education institutions across seven key areas to ensure overall quality and effectiveness (Mishra, 2022; Mishra, 2023). These include governance and leadership focused on autonomy and inclusive decision-making; curriculum and instructional delivery aligned with learning outcomes, national standards, and societal needs; and faculty management emphasizing professional development and research incentives. It also

assesses physical and digital infrastructure such as libraries and ICT resources, student support services including counseling and job placement, and research and innovation through student performance and community engagement. Lastly, the framework reviews the effectiveness of Internal Quality Assurance Systems (IQACs) and the frequency of internal quality audits, forming a comprehensive approach to institutional evaluation (UGC, 2013; HEQAAC, 2018). Despite the formalization of these standards, implementation has remained uneven. In early 2025, just 101 out of almost 1,400 higher education institutions had received accreditation (UGC, 2025). Affiliated colleges, especially those under TU, have a hard time putting in place useful QA systems since they don't have enough freedom, skilled staff, or a focus on following the rules for accreditation.

Countries around the world have used different QA models to make sure that educational standards are met, that there is openness, and that people are held accountable. The European Standards and Guidelines (ESG), the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) in the US, and India's National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) are three well-known examples.

The ESG Model

The ESG Model was created as part of the Bologna Process. It encourages a culture of quality inside institutions, institutional autonomy, and peer review systems in European higher education (ENQA, 2015). It focuses on learning that is centered on the student, recognizing qualifications, and allowing students to move between countries for school (Hernes, 2005; Martin & Uvalić-Trumbić, 2008).

The CHEA Model

QA in the US is decentralized and administered by the CHEA. Institutions go through voluntary peer-reviewed accreditation, which focuses on evaluations that are based on outcomes and are in line with the institution's objective (CHEA, 2010). This concept lets people be held accountable while also allowing for new ideas.

The NAAC Model

India's NAAC uses a structured, criterion-based framework to evaluate institutions and ties their accreditation status to their financing and rankings. It also says that IQACs must be set up to encourage ongoing internal evaluation (NAAC, 2022). This concept is very useful for Nepal because the way its institutions and governments work is comparable to those in other regions.

These models from around the world have a lot in common:

- o Structured cyclical processes of internal and external evaluation;
- o Broad stakeholder involvement, including students, faculty, and employers;
- o Emphasis on transparency and public reporting;
- o Alignment with national policy objectives and international trends (Ibrahim, 2014).

When QA systems are correctly put in place, they improve instructional efficacy, institutional governance, and the chances of graduates getting jobs (Ibrahim, 2014; QAHE, 2023).

The affiliated college system in Nepal, especially under TU, has become the most popular way for students to get their undergraduate degrees. These colleges have their own administrative powers, but they still rely on the parent university for academic matters like designing the curriculum, giving exams, and running the school (UGC, 2023). This paradigm has made it easier to get to things, but it has also made it harder to use QA.

The World Bank said in a report from 2009 that higher education in Nepal was of poor quality and that "institutional QA systems remained underdeveloped" (World Bank, 2009). These worries are still there. Most colleges that are part of the system have just nominal IQACs and see accreditation as a formality instead of a way to learn and improve the school (UGC, 2023).

The Higher Education Reform Project (HERP) and the Higher Education Quality Assurance and Accreditation Council (HEQAAC) have made the policy environment better, but political interference, limited funding, and a lack of stakeholder ownership still make it hard to put these changes into action (HEQAAC, 2018; QAHE, 2023).

Quality assurance is no longer just a side issue; it is now at the heart of the legitimacy and long-term success of higher education institutions around the world. For Nepal, it is vital to match QA methods with worldwide standards while still aware of local institutional reality. ESG, CHEA, and NAAC all teach us that it's important to create a progressive quality culture instead of just seeing accreditation as a way to follow the rules. For this change to happen, people need to grow their skills, policies need to be consistent, leaders need to be committed, and all stakeholders need to be involved.

A strong higher education system that is responsive, accountable, and trustworthy around the world is the only way for Nepal to achieve its goal of "Happy Nepali, Prosperous Nepal." It will be very important to make sure that quality is guaranteed in affiliated colleges by making IQACs stronger, giving governance structures more power, and encouraging new ideas aspiration

Despite the introduction of a structured Quality Assurance and Accreditation (QAA) framework by Nepal's University Grants Commission (UGC) in 2007, implementation across Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) remains inconsistent, fragmented, and under-resourced particularly among affiliated colleges.. These colleges are the main way for people in Nepal, especially in rural and underserved areas, to get a higher education. Affiliated colleges must set up Internal Quality Assurance Cells (IQACs), but in reality, these groups often don't have enough skilled staff, money, or institutional power to make real changes to quality. The World Bank (2009) has already criticized Nepal's QA system for making sure that procedures are followed instead

of encouraging people to accept responsibility for their actions and get involved with stakeholders.

The lack of (a) strong internal quality controls, (b) stakeholder involvement, and (c) regulatory frameworks that focus on form over function are all reasons why QAA outcomes in Nepalese higher education have not improved. These problems have hurt the reputation, job prospects, and global recognition of Nepalese degrees (QAHE, 2023).

Nepal's QAA system has been in place for about 20 years, but there hasn't been any scholarly research on how well it works and what effects it has. Most of the existing literature talks about how the system has changed over time or gives descriptive case studies of certain institutions (Khadka et al., 2019). However, there isn't a lot of real-world research that looks at how well QAA procedures work in different sorts of institutions, especially community colleges that are part of Tribhuvan University and other similar schools.

There haven't been many studies that look at how accreditation affects things like academic achievement, faculty growth, research output, or student satisfaction in the actual world (Neupane, 2019). Because there isn't enough long-term data or comparisons, it's hard to say if recognized universities do better than non-accredited ones when it comes to quality and outcomes. Also, the experiences of HEIs during the accreditation process—especially the problems they had with compliance burdens, governance limits, and lack of capacity—are still not well understood in Nepal (Raftari & Khoshnazar, 2023; Hasanzade, 2023).

Also, policy-oriented assessments often don't look at how national QA strategies are understood and put into action at the institutional level, especially in associated colleges with few resources and little freedom. This gap between policy and practice is a major problem with the quality of higher education in Nepal (Mishra & Ananda, 2022; Mishra & Jha, 2023)

Research Objectives

This systematic review aims to critically assess the evolution, implementation, and effectiveness of

quality assurance (QA) and accreditation systems in Nepalese higher education, focusing on affiliated colleges under Tribhuvan University. It examines how QA frameworks especially those set up by the University Grants Commission (UGC) have been used, finds institutional and systematic obstacles like insufficient resources, poor governance, and little stakeholder involvement, and studies recurring trends using qualitative synthesis. The survey also looks at how ready these institutions are to put in place internal quality assurance systems and meet international standards like ESG, NAAC, and CHEA. In the end, it wants to suggest policy changes that are based on evidence and support institutional autonomy, participatory quality management, and a long-lasting quality culture throughout Nepal's higher education system.

Methodology

Study Design

This study used a systematic qualitative review design based on the PRISMA 2020 (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework (Page et al., 2021) to find, evaluate, and combine existing empirical and policy-based literature on quality assurance (QA) and accreditation practices in Nepalese higher education institutions (HEIs). The review focused mostly on Tribhuvan University's affiliated colleges, which enroll a large number of students in higher education but haven't been studied as much in QA research.

Search Strategy and Data Sources

A thorough and organized search approach was used on a number of academic and institutional databases, such as:

- o Scopus
- o Web of Science
- o Google Scholar
- o IEEE Xplore
- o PubMed
- o University Grants Commission (UGC) Nepal digital repository
- o Tribhuvan University institutional archives.

We also did manual searches to find grey literature that wasn't in conventional databases, like UGC policy briefs, government white papers, accreditation reports, and national QA frameworks.

The search looked at documents published between 2005 and 2024, which is the time after Nepal's Quality Assurance and Accreditation (QAA) system was set up by the UGC in 2007.

Keywords and Boolean Operators

We used Boolean operators and combinations of keywords to make the search queries more specific. Some of the search phrases were “Quality Assurance“ and “Higher Education in Nepal” or “Accreditation” and “UGC Nepal” or “QAA Nepal” and “Tribhuvan University”

We also utilized wildcard and truncation tactics with synonyms and related phrases like "internal quality mechanisms," "IQAC," "self-study report," "UGC policy," and "HEI evaluation" to get the most coverage.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure methodological relevance and topical precision, the following criteria were defined:

Inclusion Criteria

- o Peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, and institutional reports;
- o UGC publications, HEQAAC guidelines, and Nepal government QA policies;
- o Case studies and empirical research focusing on accreditation, QA, or institutional governance in Nepalese HEIs;
- o Publications from 2005–2024 in English or Nepali.

Exclusion Criteria:

- o Editorials, commentary, or opinion pieces that aren't based on facts;
- o Papers about developing curricula that don't focus on QA methods;

- o Publications that aren't related to higher education;
- o Copies and papers that don't match the basic quality standards.

Screening and Selection Process

According to PRISMA 2020 rules, the evaluation went through four planned steps:

- o **Identification:** A first set of 456 articles was found.
- o **De-duplication:** EndNote and manual checks found and eliminated 89 duplicate entries.
- o **Screening:** 367 titles and abstracts were looked at to see if they were relevant, and 205 were not included since they did not match the topic.
- o **Eligibility Assessment:** We looked at 162 full-text documents using a set of rules for who could be included.
- o **Inclusion:** The final analysis comprised 42 studies that met the criteria..

The PRISMA 2020 flow diagram (Figure 1, not seen here) gives a full description of this procedure.

Quality Appraisal

We carefully looked at all of the papers that were included to see how rigorous, relevant, and clear their methods were:

- o We carefully looked at all of the papers that were included to see how rigorous, relevant, and clear their methods were;
- o The GRADE (Grading of Recommendations, Assessment, Development and Evaluations) approach to assess the strength and consistency of evidence across diverse document types (e.g., policy reports, empirical studies).

Data Extraction

We built a standardized data extraction matrix (in Excel) to consistently record the following variables:

- o Type of publication and year
- o Research design and methodology
- o Focus of the study (e.g., accreditation models, QA framework, institutional challenges)
- o Geographical and institutional context (e.g., affiliated colleges, national policy)
- o Reported outcomes and policy implications

We sorted the data into groups so we could look at them more closely and utilize them to help us find themes.

Thematic Analysis Procedure

We used NVivo 12 software to analyze qualitative data using the six-step theme analysis approach that Braun and Clarke (2006) came up with. The steps were:

- o Familiarization with data Getting to know the data by reading certain texts over and over again;
- o Initial coding First, code the QA-related parts (such mentions of IQAC, faculty development, and getting stakeholders involved);
- o Code generation and consolidation depends on how often and where they happen together;
- o Theme development Creating themes by putting together similar codes;
- o Two separate coders review and improve the themes, settling any disagreements by reaching a consensus or having a third party decide;
- o Narrative synthesis to report on the main and sub-themes.

From this procedure, five main theme groups came out:

- o QA Readiness and Institutional Capacity
- o External Validation and Accreditation Processes
- o Internal QA Gaps and Structural Weaknesses

- o Stakeholder Involvement and Engagement
- o Policy–Practice Disconnects and Systemic Challenges

Here are the full theme results, along with two summary tables and a graphical figure from the NVivo analysis:

Results and Discussion

This systematic review incorporated a total of 42 studies that met predefined inclusion criteria following a rigorous screening and quality appraisal process, employing both the CASP (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme) and GRADE (Grading of Recommendations, Assessment, Development and Evaluations) frameworks. The chosen literature—especially from Tribhuvan University (TU)-affiliated colleges—comprises a varied range of sources including peer-reviewed journal articles, institutional assessments, and national policy papers, each of which offers insights into the changing framework of quality assurance (QA) and accreditation practices inside Nepal's higher education (HE) sector. Five general themes surfaced from comprehensive cross-validation of documents covering the years 2007–2023 and NVivo-supported thematic analysis. These topics show how complicated it is to put QA systems into practice when there are policy mandates, institutional capability, stakeholder participation, and other factors at play. Together, they give a full picture of the structural and operational problems that come up when trying to set up QA systems in higher education institutions in Nepal that are connected to TU.

Descriptive Analysis of Included Studies

Institutional Categorization

The reviewed studies were categorized into three groups based on institutional focus: 18 studies examined public HEIs, particularly Tribhuvan University and its campuses, focusing on QA systems, policy compliance, and capacity building; 12 studies explored private HEIs, emphasizing market responsiveness, student satisfaction,

and entrepreneurship; and another 12 analyzed broader policy frameworks and the evolution of the UGC's QAA mechanisms. This classification

highlights how QA priorities and practices vary across different institutional types and governance structures.

Table 1

Temporal Distribution and Focus Areas

Year Range	Studies number	Primary Focus Area
2005- 2010	6	Setting establishing the the QAA framework UGC and policy
2011- 2016	14	Problems with putting things into action, getting stakeholders involved and changing institutions
2017- 2024	22	Internal quality control systems, results of problems with sustainability and accreditation

This increase over time shows that researchers are becoming more and more interested in QA systems at the institutional level, especially in 2007 UGC formally rolled out the QAA process. There has been a big increase in empirical and analytical studies after 2017. This is happening at the same time as Nepal is becoming more involved in regional and international certification frameworks, such as the move toward ICT-integrated QA models and the South Asian Quality Assurance System (SAQS).

Explanations from the Descriptive Profile

Early-Phase Research (2005–2010) determined mostly on the structural and policy frameworks. It documented the basis of Nepal's QA system and the reasons why UGC's involvement in quality assurance and accountability (Sanyal & Martin, 2006; Government of Nepal, 2013)

Mid-Phase Studies (2011–2016) extended the focus to more than just the original topics. They also looked at how ready institutions were, how complicated stakeholders were, and what problems were getting in the way of implementation. These studies started to show differences in how policies are made and how they are carried out in institutions (Upadhyaya, 2018; Mathema, 2007).

Recent Research (2017–2024) has mostly been done in institutions, looking at case-based evidence, internal quality assurance units (IQAU), quality indicators, and how organizations act while they are trying to get accredited. There is also more highlighting on student feedback mechanisms,

program reviews, and benchmarking (QAHE, 2023; Rawabdeh & Tbaishat, 2019).

This classification and sequential trend analysis emphasize a maturing research trajectory in Nepal's higher education QA area. The changing focus from policy-level frameworks to institutional QA practices and culture shows how important it is to make QA reforms that are based on evidence and can fit with both global standards and national aims

Thematic Analysis of Important Findings

The qualitative synthesis was conducted using inductive coding in NVivo and supplemented by manual content analysis across 42 studies spanning empirical research, policy documentation, and institutional case reports. The conceptual framework that came out of this shows five important areas that affect how well Quality Assurance (QA) works in Nepalese Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). These topics show the structural, operational, and cultural factors that help or hurt the QA ecosystem.

Theme 1: QA System Readiness

The study showed that Nepalese higher education institutions (HEIs) were not equally ready for Quality Assurance (QA). Some public universities, have set up basic systems like Internal Quality Assurance Cells (IQACs) and performance reviews. However, these systems are not consistently or fully implemented at all constituent and affiliated colleges (Upadhyaya, 2018; QAHE,

2023). Even though more and more institutions are joining the QAA process, there are still problems with strategic planning, documentation, training, and getting resources together.

For example, by 2019, 325 schools had sent Letters of Intent (LOIs) to the University Grants Commission (UGC), but only 33 were able to get accredited (UGC, 2020). This expressions that universities have a hard time going beyond the initial QA steps. Common NVivo characteristics like non-functional IQAC, inadequate infrastructure, and limited faculty training show these operational problems (Neupane, 2019). These results show that a lot of HEIs are not ready to do effective internal QA because they don't have the basics in place.

Theme 2: Accreditation as External Validation

People in Nepal's higher education system typically see accreditation as a way for outside groups to check on the quality of the schools, rather than as a natural part of their growth. The University Grants Commission set up the Quality Assurance and Accreditation framework in 2007 to encourage a culture of quality improvement, but most institutions have just used it as a tool. By 2024, just roughly 35 of Nepal's 1,400 higher education institutions had received accreditation. This means that less than 2.5% of them had done so (UGC, 2024).

Many studies (Mathema, 2007; Kamara, 2023; Sharma & Gautam, 2023a) say that institutions usually seek accreditation to meet the requirements for external grants or to renew their affiliations, not to improve the quality of their systems. Codes in NVivo like "checklist compliance," "quality mark," and "funding eligibility" back this tendency. The review indicated that people see accreditation as a mark of legitimacy, but they don't put much weight on implementing accreditation reports or recommendations to make institutions better over time (Khadka et al., 2019).

Theme 3: Underdeveloped Internal Quality Management Systems (IQMS)

Even though official policies encourage the creation of internal quality structures, the use of Internal Quality Management Systems (IQMS) in

Nepalese higher education institutions, especially community and affiliated colleges, is still quite basic. Institutions generally don't have clear quality assurance (QA) processes, self-assessment tools, or monitoring systems that are in line with learning outcomes and performance indicators (Phareli, 2011; Sharma & Gautam, 2023b).

Thematic coding brought to light common problems like "no internal audit," "lack of QA policies," "poor documentation," and "limited faculty engagement." Neupane (2019) and Gautam (2021) also found that many IQACs only work when they are needed, like during accreditation cycles, instead of being part of ongoing quality assurance practices. This sporadic involvement in QA processes makes it harder to create academic cultures that are reflective and based on data.

Theme 4: Limited Stakeholder Involvement in QA Processes

Another common issue is that important internal and external stakeholders, including teachers, students, employers, and alumni, don't always take part in the QA process or do so in a consistent way. Quality planning, self-assessment, and policy creation are usually done by only a few senior managers or QA staff members, with little involvement from other parts of the organization (Elassy, 2015; Martin & Uvalić-Trumbić, 2008).

There were very few mentions of "faculty participation," "student voice," "alumni consultation," and "employer input" in the coding patterns. This shows that important points of view were left out of QA governance. Empirical research, like Biswakarma and Dhakal (2023), point out this as a major problem, saying that the lack of inclusive governance makes it harder to hold people accountable, take responsibility, and spread the idea of a quality culture throughout the organization.

Theme 5: Policy–Implementation Gap

The last and maybe most important element is the ongoing gap between national QA policy frameworks and how they are carried out at the institutional level. The UGC and national higher education policies support outcome-based

education, participatory decision-making, and periodic self-review. However, these ideas are not often put into practice at the college level because of problems that come up in the real world (Government of Nepal, 2013; Rawabdeh & Tbaishat, 2019).

People often talked about NVivo codes like "policy ambiguity," "implementation failure," and "lack of incentives." These codes refer to systemic problems including not enough money, ineffective monitoring mechanisms, political instability, and not having enough trained QA staff. Because of this, QA is still mostly about following the rules and not very much about aligning with basic academic procedures. National QA mandates are

still just goals, not things that can be done, without strong institutional structures and conditions that make them possible (QAHE, 2023).

The topic analysis shows that Nepal's QA journey is full of hurdles and some progress. National frameworks and policies have set the stage for improving quality, but institutional preparation, internal processes, and stakeholder involvement are still not fully matured. The prevalence of symbolic certification, insufficient internal quality assurance systems, and a lack of ability to put policies into action all point to the need for strategic, inclusive, and contextually relevant changes to make a culture of continuous quality improvement a part of Nepalese higher education.

Table 2

Summary of Thematic Insights

Theme	Key Insight
QA System Readiness	There is structural unevenness and a lack of consistent QA processes across institutions.
Accreditation as Validation	The compliance-focused strategy inhibits the QAA's ability to make big changes.
Internal QA Management	Poor documentation, monitoring, and follow-up make IQMS less useful.
Stakeholder Engagement	When there is little involvement from academics and students, ownership of QA processes goes down.
Policy-Implementation Gap	Policy implementation is made harder by structural, financial, and capability problems.

Table 3

Synthesis of Key Findings

Theme	Key Findings	Sources
QA Implementation	QA systems that are broken apart and not standardized	Mathema (2007)
Policy Reforms	There are rules, but they aren't followed very well	UGC Nepal (2013)
Institutional Capacity	Not enough training on QA tools and a culture of poor documentation	Phareli (2011)
Accreditation Status	Only 35 HEIs got accreditation in 17 years	UGC Nepal (2024)
External Funding & QA	There is a strong correlation between QAA eligibility and performance metrics	Sharma & Gautam (2023)

The QA System in Nepalese Higher Education Institutions

The University Grants Commission (UGC) of Nepal set up the Quality Assurance and Accreditation (QAA) Framework to fix the quality

deficiencies that had been found. This framework encourages rigorous self-assessment, peer review evaluations, and external audits that meet global criteria (UGC, 2020).

QAA Core Dimensions and Indicators

The Quality Assurance and Accreditation (QAA) framework for higher education is based on a series of interconnected characteristics that together measure an institution's ability to ensure, improve, and maintain quality. The University

Grants Commission (UGC) in Nepal recognizes these characteristics, which are backed by a number of fundamental indicators or variables that help with both internal quality monitoring and external accrediting assessments (UGC, 2020; QAHE, 2023).

Table 4

Seven Key Thematic Areas

Thematic Area	Core Indicators/Variables
Institutional Governance	Freedom, commitment to leadership, planning for the future, and making decisions together
Curriculum & Teaching	Design of the curriculum, how it relates to the market and community, teaching methods, and learning outcomes
Faculty Development	Professional training programs, taking part in research, and performance reviews
Infrastructure & Learning Resources	Libraries, ICT centers, classrooms, labs, digital access, and systems for keeping things up to date
Student Support & Progression	Academic advising, counseling services, scholarships, help with internships, and tracking alumni
Research & Innovation	Publications by faculty, research by students, grants from other sources, and links between the community and industry
Quality Assurance Mechanisms	IQAC functionality, documentation and record-keeping, internal review cycles, and feedback loops

Governance of Institutions

A strong quality assurance (QA) system in higher education needs good governance. Key signs are that the institution is free to make its own decisions about academics, finances, and administration; that there is strong leadership with clear, regularly reviewed strategic plans; and that management is participatory, meaning that faculty, staff, and students are involved in decision-making and that everyone can see what is going on (Martin & Uvalić-Trumbić, 2008).

Curriculum and Teaching

This component stares at the academic foundation for colleges and universities, focussing on things like curriculum design that fits with national qualification systems, academic flexibility, and regular evaluations. It also looks at teaching methodologies, focussing on learner-centred approaches, using technology in the classroom, and

learning by doing. It also looks at how clear and measurable learning results are in the cognitive, emotive, and practical areas (Sanyal & Martin, 2007).

Faculty Development

This dimension focus at the academic core of higher education by judging the quality of the faculty, which has a direct effect on academic standards. Some key things are professional growth through workshops and refresher courses, getting involved in research through publications and conferences, and performance grading systems that are related to promotions, feedback, and mentoring.

Infrastructure and Learning Resources

For both learning and institutions to be productive, it is vital to have good infrastructure that is convenient to get to. This includes libraries with up-to-date physical and digital resources

and automated services; strong ICT infrastructure with smart classrooms, digital repositories, LMS integration, and internet access across the campus; and enough classrooms and subject-specific labs that meet both academic and practical needs (UGC, 2020).

Student Support and Progression

Services that focus on students are an important part of quality assurance since they help students grow academically and personally. These include academic advising and counselling to help students make decisions about their education, career, and personal life; scholarships and financial aid to help students who are struggling or doing well; and career services and alumni tracking to help students find jobs, set up job fairs, and keep in touch with graduates.

Research and Innovation

This dimension examines how institutions add to the larger knowledge ecosystem by having staff and students publish things like creative works and peer-reviewed articles. It also looks at how to get and use research grants from both national and international sources, as well as community connections that involve outreach, working together on research with businesses, and programs that are socially innovative (Rawabdeh & Tbaishat, 2019).

Quality Assurance Mechanisms

Quality assurance systems in institutions are very important for keeping up long-term quality in higher education. This includes having active Internal Quality Assurance Cells (IQACs) with trained staff and institutional support, keeping detailed records of minutes, self-assessment reports, and review documents, and doing regular internal reviews that look at performance and make changes based on feedback from stakeholders and outside auditors (QAHE, 2023).

These seven QAA categories and their related indicators make up a complete system for judging how well Nepalese higher education institutions perform. When they are used correctly, they encourage planning based on evidence,

accountability among stakeholders, and ongoing improvement of the institution. For higher education institutions (HEIs) who want to get or keep their accreditation, it is very important to make sure that their activities are in line with these aspects to show that they have a quality culture and a focus on development.

Global Comparisons and Relevance

As globalization and regional academic integration grow, more and more people are judging how well national Quality Assurance (QA) systems work by how well they meet international standards. The European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) in the United States, and the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) in India are all well-known global QA systems. They all have strong, multi-dimensional frameworks that focus on improving institutions, maintaining academic integrity, and getting stakeholders involved.

European Standards and Guidelines (ESG)

The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) came up with the ESG framework. It stresses that institutions should always be working to improve by having both internal and external evaluations, getting students involved in QA decision-making, and being open about how they do things and what they find. Institutions in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) must follow ESG principles so that students can move around and have their qualifications recognised in other countries. The ESG is a leading model for international quality assurance since it focusses on the student learning experience, institutional autonomy, and evidence-based monitoring (European Students' Union, 2003).

Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), USA

The Council for Higher Education certification (CHEA) works in the U.S. higher education

system, which is decentralised. Most of the time, certification is voluntary and done by independent, recognised accrediting agencies that are overseen by the Department of Education. CHEA's approach focusses on purpose-fit accreditation models instead of strict standardisation. It also stresses public accountability and alignment with institutional missions, and it uses peer reviews and self-study reports to encourage organisational learning (CHEA, 2010; Hernes, 2005). This framework encourages institutions to be different and creative, and it makes sure that greatness is recognised by reputable third parties.

India's National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC)

The National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) in India uses a structured, criteria-based evaluation method to look at things including curriculum design, institutional management, research, student support, and infrastructure. It has a grade scale from A++ to C that takes into account both quantitative and qualitative elements. Every school must have an Internal Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC) (NAAC, 2020). NAAC has created a national culture of quality assurance by tying accreditation to government financing and performance-based rankings like the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF). This is a great example for nations like Nepal.

Benefits of Robust QA Systems

According to global best practices, well-functioning QA systems have many benefits:

Transparency and Accountability

Good QA systems build trust in institutions and the public by making sure that processes are clear, stakeholders are included, and decisions are founded on evidence (Hernes, 2005; QAHE, 2023). Institutions are responsible to more than just the government; they are also responsible to students, parents, employers, and funding agencies.

Improved Learning Outcomes and Employability

Accredited schools usually report greater curricular relevance, graduate employability, and faculty development outcomes. Accreditation

makes sure that schools' academic programs are in line with what employers want, which makes students more ready for work (Ibrahim, 2014).

Student and Faculty Mobility

Following worldwide QA standards like ESG or ISO 21001 makes it easier to transfer credits, recognize each other's certifications, and work together across borders. This is especially significant for Nepal, which is joining more and more international education groups (Martin & Uvalić-Trumbić, 2008).

Relevance for Nepal

Nepal may learn a lot from these worldwide QA systems to make its own QAA system, which is run by the UGC, stronger. Here are some ways it can do this:

- o Encouraging stakeholders (particularly students and employers) to take part in QA evaluations,
- o Incentivizing institutions to integrate QA into strategic planning and resource allocation,
- o Making evidence-based self-assessment and external review cycles a regular part of the process,
- o Making national qualification frameworks (NQFs) and outcome-based curricula to make sure that things can be compared across countries.

The global trend toward student-centered learning, digital QA platforms, and data-driven evaluations gives Nepalese higher education institutions (HEIs) practical tools to improve their long-term quality and global academic visibility.

Aligning Nepal's QAA system with worldwide QA frameworks like ESG, CHEA, and NAAC can help it grow faster into a strong, participatory, and globally recognized quality culture. This would make Nepalese higher education more credible both at home and abroad, which will help the country's aims of academic achievement, social mobility, and innovation.

Implications for Nepal

Nepal's higher education system is at a very important point right now. It is growing quickly, becoming more political, and not getting enough money for institutional development and research (Mathema, 2007; Upadhyaya, 2018). These structural problems put Nepalese Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) at risk of losing their reputation, fairness, and ability to compete internationally. In this situation, the University Grants Commission (UGC) is not just enforcing Quality Assurance and Accreditation (QAA) systems; it is also changing the way things work and making them more strategic.

Enhancing Academic Integrity and Institutional Credibility

Quality assurance systems that work are important for upholding academic norms, stopping bad behavior, and promoting a culture of openness and making decisions based on facts. By making Internal Quality Assurance Cells (IQACs) a part of its structure, requiring regular self-assessments, and encouraging peer-reviewed external evaluations, HEIs can greatly improve:

- o Curriculum relevance
- o Faculty performance
- o Systems for testing students These changes restore public faith in higher education and eliminate politicization, making institutions respectable agents of national growth (Elassy, 2015; QAHE, 2023).

Promoting International Recognition and Academic Mobility

Nepalese HEIs face growing pressure to align with international quality benchmarks, particularly in the context of the SAARC, BIMSTEC, and wider global academic mobility frameworks. QAA-accredited institutions are better placed on Facilitate credit transfer agreements, Participate in academic exchange and joint research programs and Pursue cross-border accreditation With only 35 out of 1,400+ HEIs accredited as of 2024 (UGC, 2024), the need to scale accreditation coverage is

urgent. Expanding the reach of QAA will enhance the global reputation and recognition of Nepalese degrees, ultimately improving graduate mobility and employability (Martin & Uvalić-Trumbić, 2008; Ibrahim, 2014).

Supporting the National Vision: “Happy Nepali, Prosperous Nepal”

Nepal's long-term development vision, "Happy Nepali, Prosperous Nepal," focusses on making sure that everyone has access to quality education that prepares them for jobs in the national job market, supports entrepreneurship, and helps people move up the social ladder. This strategy is supported by a strong Quality Assurance and Accreditation (QAA) system that boosts productivity, makes sure that everyone has equal access to education in all regions, and boosts research and innovation that is related to national priorities (Government of Nepal, 2013). QAA links institutional financing, program continuation, and faculty promotions to unambiguous QA indicators. This helps the University Grants Commission (UGC) and policymakers make the best use of resources, push for governance improvements, and plan higher education based on strong data. These kinds of systems encourage institutions to be independent, responsible, and always coming up with new ideas (Sanyal & Martin, 2006; QAHE, 2023). In the end, Nepal's higher education system needs strong QAA systems to deal with the problems it already has and turn accreditation from a list of things that need to be done into a flexible tool for achieving academic excellence, global competitiveness, and long-term economic growth in the knowledge economy of the 21st century.

Thematic Mapping of QA Indicators for Nepalese HEIs

Thematic mapping gives us a way to look at the main parts of Quality Assurance (QA) in Nepalese Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in an organized way. This framework combines the Quality Assurance and Accreditation (QAA) criteria set by the University Grants Commission (UGC) Nepal with the best practices seen around the world (QAHE, 2023; Martin & Uvalić-Trumbić,

2008). The mapping connects institutional themes to sub-indicators that may be acted on and variables that can be measured for effective performance evaluation, accountability, and ongoing quality improvement.

Theme 1: Quality Assurance Systems

Sub-Themes/Indicators. the status of accreditation, the results of peer reviews, and how well the institution does its own assessments.

Key Variables

- o Existence and operationalization of an Internal Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC)
- o Completion of annual review cycles
- o Submission of Self-Study Reports (SSR) and external validation

Institutions with organized QA systems are more prepared for accreditation, have a better culture of documentation, and are better at strategic planning. The way IQACs work is an important sign of how well Nepal's QAA system is working.

Theme 2: Curriculum and Instruction

Sub-Themes/Indicators: Curriculum design processes, teaching-learning methodologies, and alignment with graduate outcomes.

Key Variables

- o Curriculum review periodicity
- o Use of Outcome-Based Education principles
- o Faculty engagement in pedagogy and assessment training

Curriculum relevance and pedagogy significantly influence the teaching-learning process. Ensuring alignment with labor market needs and national qualifications frameworks promotes employability and learning effectiveness (Sanyal& Martin, 2006).

Theme 3: Institutional Governance

Sub-Themes/Indicators/Sub-Themes/Indicators: commitment from leaders, freedom, and policy alignment.

Key Variables

- o Availability of strategic and operational plans
- o Autonomy in academic, administrative, and financial domains
- o Existence of institutional bylaws aligned with UGC guidelines

Good governance is the basis for long-term quality. Leadership that combines open communication and participatory management builds trust and resilience in institutions.

Theme 4: Research and Innovation

Sub-Themes/Indicators. the amount of research done, the culture of innovation, and community-based scholarship..

Key Variables

- o Number of peer-reviewed publications per faculty/year
- o Acquisition of research grants (UGC, national, international)
- o Number of community or industry-linked research projects

Quality should be improved by improving and adopting proper knowledge management in industries (Gautam & Mahat, 2022). A vibrant research environment boosts the status of institutions and helps the country's innovation systems. It is also a key part in getting accredited.

Theme 5: Infrastructure

Sub-Themes/Indicators: access to ICT, physical and digital infrastructure, and upkeep of facilities..

Key Variables

- o Student-to-computer ratio
- o Learning Management System (LMS) accessibility
- o ICT master plan implementation and digital content integration

Infrastructure preparation makes digital transformation possible and helps both academic delivery and administrative efficiency (Government of Nepal, 2013).

Theme 6: Student Services

Sub-Themes / Indicators: Student welfare, career and academic support, and feedback systems.

Key Variables

- o Counseling and mentoring service availability
- o Provision and diversity of scholarship programs
- o Use of Student Satisfaction Surveys and graduate tracer studies

Good student services improve retention, performance, and social inclusion. Feedback systems are very important for making institutions better.

Theme 7: Policy Environment

Sub-Themes/Indicators. Regulatory compliance, institutional response to UGC guidelines, and policy adoption.

Key Variables

- o Institutional alignment with UGC/ National QA policies
- o Internalization of accreditation standards into institutional policies
- o Compliance reporting mechanisms and documentation

A small but changing collection of national laws, regulations, and sectoral projects aiming to guarantee workplace safety, health fairness, and institutional responsibility controls occupational health in Nepal. The implementation of these regulations to the higher education sector—especially in universities, component campuses, and linked institutions—remains inconsistent and mostly ignored, though (Gautam, Mishra, & V T, 2025). Aligning institutional operations with national QA frameworks makes ensuring that everything is the same, open, and eligible for financing and ranking.

Table 5

Thematic Mapping Summary

Theme	Sub-Themes / Indicators	Key Variables
QA Systems	Accreditation, Peer Review, Self-Assessment	IQAC Functionality, Review Cycles
Curriculum and Instruction	Curriculum Design, Teaching Methods	Learning Outcomes Alignment, Faculty Training
Institutional Governance	Leadership, Autonomy, Policy Compliance	Strategic Documents, Institutional Autonomy
Research and Innovation	Research Output, Community Engagement	Publications, Grants, Research Projects
Infrastructure	ICT, Learning Spaces, Digital Tools	LMS Access, ICT Master Plan, Infrastructure Gaps
Student Services	Counseling, Scholarships, Placement Support	SSS Data, Career Services, Inclusion Programs
Policy Environment	QA Policy Compliance, Statutory Frameworks	National Alignment, Internal QA Policy Adoption

This thematic framework gives Nepalese higher education institutions a complete way to measure their performance. It helps with planning at the institution level, helps the UGC keep an

eye on quality assurance, and helps with self-assessment when applying for or renewing the QAA. This mapping makes it easier to take a systematic approach to continuous improvement,

accountability, and being ready for accreditation by turning abstract quality concepts into quantitative indicators.

Evolution of QA Discourse

As illustrated in the thematic time trend:

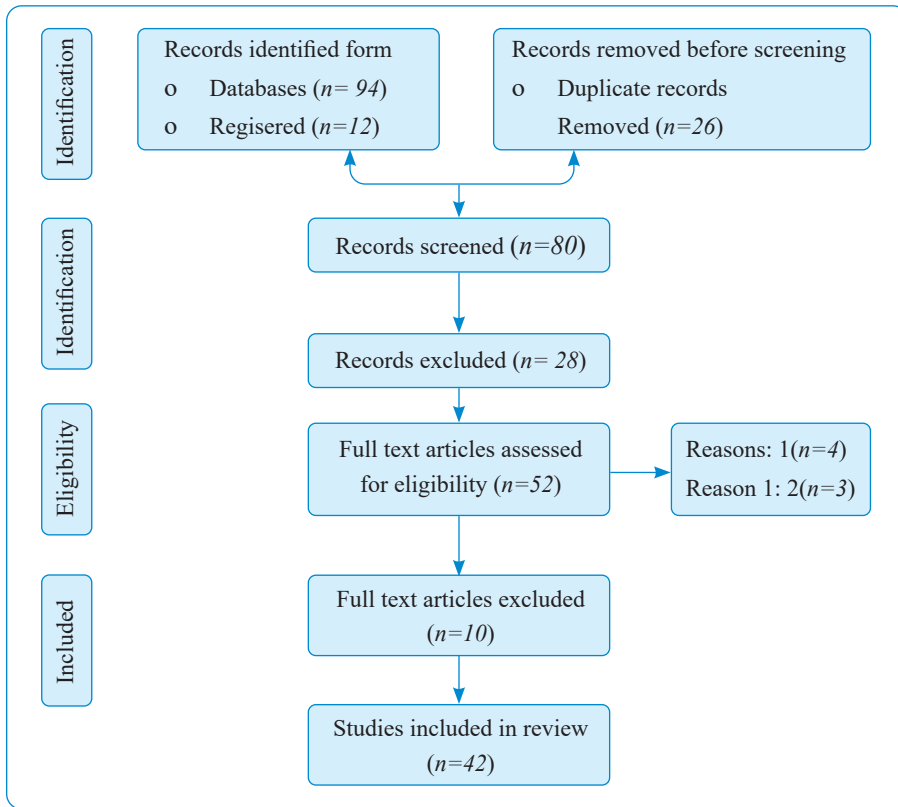
- o **2007–2010:** Emphasis on framework establishment,

- o **2011–2016:** Focus on capacity development and institutional readiness,
- o **2017–2024:** Expansion toward digital QA tools and stakeholder-driven quality culture.

• Figure 1: PRISMA Flow Diagram for Literature Screening and Inclusion

Figure 1

Vivo Thematic Coding Tree (Hierarchy of Themes and Sub-Themes)



Interpretation of Findings

The findings of this systematic review indicate that the accreditation process in Nepalese Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) has brought about procedural reforms, but remains largely compliance-oriented and externally driven. Many people see accreditation as a way to meet the University Grants Commission (UGC) regulations instead of as a way to change the way an institution works (Sanyal & Martin, 2006; QAHE, 2023).

Because of this, many higher education institutions seek accreditation to make sure they can get money or renew their affiliation, not because they want to develop a culture of quality over the long term.

The use of internal quality assurance (IQA) methods in schools is still poor, especially in community colleges and colleges that are part of the TU system. Even when IQACs are set up, they often don't have the freedom to make decisions, the money they need, or the skilled staff they need

(Upadhyaya, 2018). Faculty and staff sometimes don't have the time or motivation to include QA in their everyday work and teaching (Rawabdeh & Tbaishat, 2019; Mathema, 2007).

Comparative Synthesis of Reviewed Literature

All of the studies agree that institutional leadership, stakeholder involvement, and open governance are important parts of quality assurance systems (Martin & Uvalić-Trumbić, 2008; Elassy, 2015). But there are differences in how public and private organizations use QA. Public higher education institutions (HEIs) usually focus on

following UGC rules, while private universities prefer to use techniques that are more focused on students and the market (Phareli, 2011; Kamara, 2023). Differences in regional and institutional autonomy also determine how much QA is used. Private institutions are more flexible, but they have problems with cost and access (Ríos, 2015).

Comparative Cross-National Analysis

Nepal's QA practices are compared with QA systems in Malaysia, India, and Bangladesh to assess regional relevance and applicability:

Table 6

QA systems in Malaysia, India, and Bangladesh

Country	Model Features	Lessons for Nepal
Malaysia	Outcome-Based Education (OBE), accreditation linked to learning outcomes	Curriculum and QA linkage ensures employability and relevance.
India	Regulatory, multi-criteria, cyclical, grade-based, tied to grants	Use of re-accreditation cycles and public scoring ensures continuity; but risks bureaucratization.
Bangladesh	Voluntary, evolving; HEQEP supported capacity building of IQACs	Focus on capacity-building before enforcement; peer training and support needed.
Policy Practice Gaps	Policy ambiguity, Poor monitoring, Inconsistent application	59

Nepal should adopt a hybrid approach: integrating Malaysia's outcome-based education, India's structured cycles, and Bangladesh's emphasis on institutional capacity building.

Conceptualizing Quality in the Nepalese Context

When viewed through Garvin's (1988) and Green's (1994) models, the current quality practices in Nepalese HEIs emphasize:

- o Fitness for purpose .
- o Conformance to external standards .
- o Limited adoption of transformative excellence

For Nepal to evolve toward a more transformational model, quality must be defined beyond minimum thresholds, focusing instead on

holistic development, stakeholder satisfaction, and societal contribution.

Toward a Transformational QA Ecosystem

To transition from a compliance-oriented to a transformational QA ecosystem, Nepal's higher education sector must adopt a multi-pronged strategy that blends national goals with global alignment, Institutional autonomy with accountability, regulatory enforcement with stakeholder co-creation and digital innovation with capacity building. By institutionalizing these recommendations, Nepal can elevate the quality, relevance, and international recognition of its higher education system, ensuring that QA becomes a pillar of strategic governance and national development

Nepal's higher education sector is at a critical juncture. The review highlights a pressing need to transition from a compliance-focused QA paradigm to a culture of continuous institutional improvement. By empowering IQACs, investing in digital systems, aligning with global standards, and reconceptualizing quality from a stakeholder and transformational lens, Nepal can meaningfully reform its QA framework and advance educational excellence.

Conclusion

Nepal's journey toward strengthening quality assurance in higher education reflects both commendable progress and persistent structural challenges. The introduction of the Quality Assurance and Accreditation (QAA) framework by the University Grants Commission (UGC) in 2007 laid the foundation for a systematic approach to enhancing academic standards. However, its implementation has largely remained fragmented and compliance-driven rather than transformative. The systematic review revealed five key themes: QA system readiness, external validation, internal QA management, stakeholder involvement, and the policy-practice gap, all of which highlight the institutional constraints that prevent higher education institutions (HEIs), especially Tribhuvan University-affiliated colleges, from achieving meaningful and sustained quality reform. Internal Quality Assurance Cells (IQACs), though mandated, often function nominally due to inadequate autonomy, limited resources, and a lack of skilled personnel. Stakeholder participation remains weak, with minimal integration of faculty, students, and employers into the QA cycle.

Despite having well-structured national policies, HEIs struggle to align internal practices with policy goals. Accreditation is frequently viewed as a means to secure affiliation or funding rather than a catalyst for institutional learning and improvement. Furthermore, the lack of outcome-based educational frameworks, weak documentation practices, and limited digital infrastructure impede the development of a quality-

driven academic culture. Comparative insights from global QA systems such as the ESG in Europe, CHEA in the U.S., and NAAC in India—demonstrate that strong internal mechanisms, stakeholder engagement, and transparency are critical to a robust QA ecosystem. Nepal's QA policy must evolve from symbolic certification to an integrated institutional culture where quality assurance supports academic integrity, stakeholder accountability, and institutional autonomy.

To bridge the existing policy-practice gap and move toward a transformational QA paradigm, Nepal must invest in capacity building, empower IQACs, digitize QA processes, and link accreditation outcomes to institutional planning and funding. Aligning with global best practices and national development goals such as "Happy Nepali, Prosperous Nepal," Nepalese HEIs can transition toward a credible, accountable, and competitive higher education system. The future of quality in Nepal's higher education lies not merely in policy compliance, but in building a resilient culture of continuous improvement and innovation.

Policy Recommendations

Strengthen Internal Quality Assurance Mechanisms (IQACs):

- o Allocate budgets and staff for functional autonomy.
- o Develop and enforce SOPs for IQAC operations.
- o Require regular self-assessments and stakeholder feedback analysis.

Leadership and Governance Structures:

- o Provide training on quality management and strategic planning.
- o Introduce incentives for successful QA leadership.
- o Professionalize leadership and reduce political influence.

Develop and Implement Digital QA Systems:

- o Use data visualization tools to support decision-making

- o Create a national QA portal for real-time tracking and submissions.
- o Digitize documentation and assessments.

Introduce Outcome-Based Curriculum Reform

- o Embed learning outcomes and competency-based frameworks.
- o Revise accreditation to include graduate outcomes .
- o Promote formative assessments linked to industry needs.

Promote Global Alignment and Recognition

- o Encourage benchmarking and participation in global QA networks.
- o Adopt regional/international QA frameworks.
- o Support HEIs in pursuing international accreditation.

Institutionalize Stakeholder Feedback Mechanisms

- o Use feedback in curriculum, self-study, and evaluation processes.
- o Create formal feedback systems involving key stakeholders.
- o Ensure feedback informs actual improvements in quality and services.

Final Reflections

This review underscores that accreditation in Nepalese HEIs—particularly within Tribhuvan University-affiliated colleges—remains at a formative and procedural stage. While a national QA framework exists, its practical adoption is hindered by capacity constraints, lack of motivation, and minimal ownership. However, the presence of emerging success stories indicates that accreditation, when institutionally embraced, can catalyze academic reform and institutional credibility.

A cultural shift is therefore imperative one that redefines QA not as a compliance burden but as a strategic opportunity for excellence, continuous improvement, and societal accountability. Aligning QA initiatives with Nepal’s broader development

vision “Happy Nepali, Prosperous Nepal” will ensure that higher education in Nepal not only expands in quantity but also excels in quality, relevance, and global competitiveness.

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