

# Collaborative Culture in Higher Education Institutions in Pokhara

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## Abstract

*This study investigated collaborative culture (CC) among faculty in Nepalese higher education institutions (HEIs), aiming to understand the discrepancy between espoused values and actual collaborative practices. Employing a mixed-methods approach, quantitative data from 236 faculty members across eight HEIs in Pokhara and qualitative insights from focus group discussions revealed a complex picture. While faculty valued diversity, trust, and teamwork, the study identified key challenges hindering effective collaborative culture implementation. These included political interference in institutional affairs, negative perceptions and experiences with teamwork, and diversity practices that were often formalistic and lacked genuine integration. The study indicated that while collaborative culture is recognized as essential, its practical realization is hampered by these political and cultural factors. Bridging the gap between policy and practice requires policy reforms that promote inclusive collaboration, active faculty engagement in collaborative initiatives, and institutional leadership that models and champions collaborative behavior.*

**Keywords:** Collaborative culture, diversity, higher education, teamwork, trust

## Cite this paper

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## Introduction

Collaboration has drawn attention in the field of education due to the relevance of establishing a collaborative culture within educational organizations (Henard & Roseveare, 2012). The institution's quality is raised as a result, demonstrating the crucial function that collaborative culture plays not only at the level of instructors and students but also at the institutional level (Kasmawati, 2019). The goal of a collaborative culture is to gain an understanding of how collaborative leadership enhances educational institutions (Carpenter, 2015). The lack of collaboration among the faculties has been highlighted in a prior study (Acharya et al., 2019). Contradictory findings on different factors affecting collaborative culture were revealed in prior studies (Barczak et al., 2010; Jong et al., 2019; Paudel, 2020). Therefore, it is important to assess the important factors affecting collaborative culture (CC) and also the status of collaborative culture in HEIs in Nepal.

Ayenalem et al. (2022) stressed the need for collaboration between senior and junior faculty members of HEIs so that academic performance is enhanced. They also stated and found that the collaboration between senior and junior faculty members is too weak and is only limited to material sharing. The findings are consistent with the findings made by different scholars (Jong et al., 2019; Muckenthaler et al., 2020; Vangrieken & Kyndt, 2015). Acharya et al. (2019) revealed that collaborative learning and activity-based inquiry have not been practiced

for a long time. The study conducted by Poudel (2021) revealed collaboration in the form of trust exists in Higher education. However, the study conducted by Barczak et al. (2010) reveals contradictory findings. They revealed that CC influences creativity but affective trust does not necessarily lead to creativity. This issue raises one important question, which factors are important to enhance collaborative culture?

There are various dimensions of collaborative culture as highlighted previously. For instance, teamwork, trust, diversity, communication cohesion and others. In a situation when there is ambiguity, trust is the expectation of a favorable (or neutral) outcome based on the expected behavior of the other party (Bhattacharya et al., 1998). The degree to which the trustor has confidence in the trustee's good faith and dependability in a dangerous exchange situation is referred to as trust (Das & Teng, 1998). For good production and excellent communication among employees in the organization, teamwork is crucial (Hersey et al., 2007). A team is a collection of people who work together to accomplish the same tasks and objectives to provide first-rate services. Diversity in the classroom refers to differences in social identities. A person's age, race, socioeconomic status, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, disability, and nationality all comprise a person's social identity.

Despite the growing emphasis on collaborative culture in higher education institutions, existing studies present mixed findings regarding its key determinants and implications. While some studies highlight trust as a critical factor in fostering collaboration (Kucharska, 2017; Poudel, 2021), others suggest that trust alone may not significantly influence knowledge-sharing behaviors (Omerzel et al., 2011; Maharjan, 2020). Furthermore, prior research has largely overlooked the role of diversity and communication cohesion in shaping collaborative culture, especially in the context of HEIs in Nepal. Additionally, studies have primarily focused on organizational collaboration at a broad level, with limited insights into the collaboration between faculty members. While prior research has predominately focused on a quantitative research approach, the present research employs mixed-method exploration to identify the collaborative culture among faculty members in higher education in Pokhara. Given these inconsistencies, further investigation is necessary to understand the factors influencing collaborative culture among faculty members in Nepalese HEIs.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to provide valuable insights into the factors influencing collaborative culture (CC) among faculty members in Nepalese higher education institutions (HEIs). Collaborative culture plays a pivotal role in enhancing knowledge sharing, improving academic performance, and fostering institutional growth. Given the current challenges in collaboration among faculty members in Nepal, this research aims to identify the barriers and key enablers of collaboration, especially in terms of trust, teamwork, and diversity. Understanding these factors can help HEIs develop strategies to cultivate a collaborative environment, thereby improving the quality of education and organizational outcomes. This study is especially relevant for policymakers and administrators looking to promote collaboration as a tool for enhancing academic excellence and institutional development in Nepalese HEIs. The primary aim of this study is to explore the key factors affecting the collaborative culture among faculty members in Nepalese HEIs and assess the status of CC in these institutions. The research will also identify potential barriers to effective collaboration and suggest measures to overcome them.

## **Literature Review**

Collaborative Culture (CC) as discussed earlier is an important dimension of organizational culture. It is an important factor that needs to be considered by all HEIs. A study carried out by Islam et al. (2011) carried out a study on organizational culture and knowledge-sharing behavior by using cross-sectional quantitative data in the service organization. Out of four variables in the study, three variables namely trust, communication between staff and leadership are important factors affecting knowledge sharing among employees. Out of the three factors, leadership seems to be the most important factor followed by communication and trust. The study results are similar to the findings made by some other researchers (Issa & Haddad, 2008; Syed-Ikhsan & Rowland, 2004; Welch & Welch, 2005). The study also proposes to use the same variables in future research by using larger samples. Shehzad (2022) carried out a study on CC in Pakistani manufacturing and service firms. The study concluded that CC is an important factor that contributes to knowledge management process and innovative

organization. The findings are similar to the findings made by other studies (Yang et al., 2018; Le et al., 2020). Yang et al. (2018) carried out a study of CC in Chinese firms. The study concludes that collaborative culture is an important factor in the knowledge management process. It demonstrates that CC exists in the organization. However, trust seems to be an important factor.

Kucharska (2017) demonstrated that trust was an important factor of collaborative culture and collaborative culture also influences trust. Similarly, those factors have a strong influence on tacit knowledge sharing. Poudel (2021) carried out a study on knowledge management enablers in HEIs of Nepal. Using cross-sectional quantitative data from 304 faculty members, the study concluded that trust seems to be an important enabler. He also revealed a strong association between trust and the knowledge-sharing behaviour of faculty members. Maharjan (2020) examined the relationship between KM enablers and knowledge creation internationalization in the hospitality industry of Nepal. Using a self-administered questionnaire from 382 respondents, the key enablers were collaboration, trust, learning and information technology. Additionally, the controlling variables as the department of the faculty need to be addressed in future studies. Ayenalem et al. (2022) found that the collaboration between senior and junior faculty members is too weak and is only limited to material sharing. The findings are consistent with the findings made by different scholars (Jong et al., 2019; Muckenthaler et al., 2020; Vangrieken & Kyndt, 2015). Acharya et al. (2019) revealed that collaborative learning and activity-based inquiry have not been practiced for a long time. The study conducted by Poudel (2021) revealed collaboration in the form of trust exists in Higher education. However, the study conducted by Barczak et al. (2010) reveals contradictory findings. Prior studies have highlighted the less practice of diversified culture and diversity not being the important factors of collaborative culture. The difference in the findings is due to the study settings. Therefore, further research is required to fill those gaps.

## **Methods**

### **Research Design**

The present research employs an explanatory sequential to identify the collaborative culture practice among faculty members. This design is also used in the study as it deals with cross-sectional and qualitative data (Ansari et al., 2022). The research has been conducted in two stages to cover the research design. First of all, the quantitative data has been utilized to identify the important factors of collaborative culture. The second stage uses the Focus Group Discussion (FGD), a qualitative technique to identify why those factors are important to enhance collaborative culture. This method was used in the study to clarify, extend and challenge data collected from the questionnaire method (Morgan, 1988).

### **Population and Sample**

The first stage comprises quantitative data collection. For this purpose, the study unit comprises all HEIs of Pokhara which have obtained the Quality Assurance and Accreditation (QAA) from the UGC, Nepal. The major justification for the selection of the study unit is that UGC Nepal has already conducted a level of assessment regarding the collaboration culture, knowledge sharing and evaluation of performance on the different benchmarks (University Grants Commission Nepal, 2022). The study unit comprises HEIs located in Pokhara Valley. The sampling units are the eight accredited institutions that have already been accredited by UGC (University Grants Commission Nepal, 2023). The sample size included 236 respondents as per the rule for the population of 580 faculty members. The sample size of each campus has been determined proportionately. The sample size of 236 provides evidence of sample adequacy as per Krejcie and Morgan (1970). Simple random sampling has been employed and the random table has also been used for the selection of particular respondents (Kothari, 2019). This method is beneficial as it assures representation of the whole population (Fink, 2003). The study therefore follows the multi-stage sampling i.e first, the selection of the institution and full-time faculties was based on purposive sampling and then the selection of respondents was based on simple random sampling.

For the qualitative data collection, purposive sampling has been employed in the study. The sample size to be included in the FGD was based on the study proposed by Nyumba et al. (2018). In the present research, only two FGDs were conducted among 7 and 13 participants representing different stakeholders of academic institutions.

The FGD included members from the Self-Assessment Team (SAT), the Internal Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC) head and chairman of the Research Management Cell (RMC), campus chief, assistant campus chief, student's representative, guardian, employee, industrialist, chairman of the school management committee, chairman of the campus management committee and also the coordinator of the student counseling cell higher education institution.

### **Instruments and Data Collection**

The study utilizes a questionnaire for the collection of quantitative data. Ngulube (2015) has focused on using a questionnaire quantitative method. Borg and Gall (1989) stressed using a questionnaire for collecting data on educational issues. The questionnaire includes all scales of measurement namely nominal, ordinal and interval scales. Likewise, the open-ended questions are also included in the questionnaire. Using a five-point Likert scale with a middle and a four-point Likert scale without one, Adelson and McCoach (2010) investigated the validity of a two-factor model of the instrument with 606 children (grades three through six). They discovered a strong model fit for the instrument whether a midpoint was included or not; however, including a five-point Likert scale produced a noticeably higher reliability estimate for the instrument. Although the reliabilities of the four-point and five-point scales were not significantly different from one another, Alwin and Krosnick (1991) noticed a pattern of increased reliability with an increasing number of anchors (from three to four, to seven, and to nine) in response scales. Therefore, the present research includes a questionnaire with a 7-point Likert scale. Cohen et al. (2002) also claimed that high-scale points of the Likert scale increase reliability. It has been scaled as 1- Strongly Disagree (SD), 2-Disagree (D), 3-Somewhat Disagree (SWD), 4- Neither Agree Nor Disagree (N), 5-Somewhat Agree (SWA), 6-Agree (A), and 7-Strongly Agree (SA). The construct CC has been measured by three variables namely trust, team and diversity. The three items of teamwork were borrowed from (Jun et al., 2006). Farsi (2022) validates scale represents two items of a team. Trust has been measured by 3 items as per the measures validated by Chow and Chan (2008). Kmieciak (2020) two items of trust has been used in the research. Likewise, Leveson et al. (2009) valid 5 items measures diversity components.

For the collection of qualitative data, FGD was initiated with the help of a moderator. The first FGD session lasted for one hour and 47 minutes and the second lasted for 1 hour 29 minutes. The length of time is within the limit as prescribed by Barbour (2010) who recommends conducting for one hour to no more than two hours. The opening and closing sessions of the FGD has not been recorded. Consent was taken from each participant before conducting it. The recording has also been done as per the participants' consent. Details of the procedure for conducting FGD were also informed to all participants. The open-ended questions for FGD were prepared as per the results of quantitative data analysis output and expert's opinion.

### **Method of Analysis**

The data was collected from primary sources and later transferred to SPSS for coding, recording and analysis of data. To assess the important factors of collaborative culture, the descriptive analysis was used to present descriptive results through mean values and ranking was done as per the mean value obtained. The highest mean value indicated the most important factors of collaborative culture. The different outputs generated as per the research objectives were converted to a tabular form in MS Excel. For the effective retrieval of research output for future purposes, the data output has been stored in a computer, pen drive and Google drive too.

For the qualitative data analysis, the FGD sessions with participants' consent were conducted using a digital voice-recorded device. The recording was ensured in MP3 and WAV format. The recording was later transferred to the computer via a USB cable. The file was transferred to make it secure for future use. The researcher was present during the discussion as a moderator. Similarly, a senior professor and a faculty member who was already trained in qualitative data analysis were selected for note-taking and transcribing. Details of the FGD along with the research objectives were given to them. Later the recorded data was listened to multiple times and the data were manually transcribed by identifying the reasons for choosing the major factors of collaborative culture which was obtained from quantitative data analysis. The participants were given code numbers of 1 to 17. Quality control

was ensured by reviewing the transcripts to validate the accuracy of the content and to identify any missing information. It was cross-checked against the audio recordings to ensure fidelity. It was ensured that all personal information and sensitive data were anonymized or removed to maintain confidentiality. The statements given by the participants were presented in narrative forms.

## Results and Discussion

### Results

The first part of this section presents the important results from both quantitative and qualitative analysis. This part exhibits the status of collaborative in the form of teamwork, trust and diversity.

### Quantitative Analysis

Table 1

Dimensions of Collaborative Culture (CC)

Variables	Mean	(SD)	Rank	Description
Diversity (DY)	5.10	1.09	1	Good
Trust (TR)	4.71	1.15	2	Good
Teamwork (TW)	4.59	0.91	3	Good

*n* = 236

Table 4.5 presents the status of collaborative culture based on three key variables: diversity, teamwork and trust. Diversity (DY) within the studied context exhibited a mean score of 5.10 (SD = 1.09), ranking it highest among the three variables. It was categorized as good. Trust (TR) displayed a mean score of 4.71 (SD = 1.15), ranking it second among the variables. The level of trust within the collaborative culture is also perceived as "Good," though slightly lower than diversity. Teamwork (TW) had a mean score of 4.59 (SD = 0.91), placing it third among the variables. Nevertheless, the level of teamwork is still perceived as "Good." It indicates that diversity is an important factor of collaborative culture compared to trust and teamwork. It indicates a satisfactory level of internal collaboration.

### Qualitative Exploration

Participants were asked to express their opinions on the first discussion questions. The discussion question was intended to identify the status of collaborative culture and the most important factor being practiced in HEIs. The majority of the participants expressed that the internal collaborative culture has not been properly exercised in HEIs. The participants were coded as P-1 to P-17. The first response was by an FGD participant P-16 who expressed that the CC in HEIs is not as per standard. P-16 says,

*In our organization, we often focus on internal collaboration, and it's a practice we've embraced. To enhance internal collaboration, we employ the 5 C's approach, which emphasizes commitment, conversation, communication, coordination, and cooperation. Regarding the three factors mentioned in the discussion questions—teamwork, trust, and diversity—I firmly believe that each of them holds equal importance. Diversity plays a pivotal role in fostering integrity, which in turn nurtures trust. This trust is the cornerstone of effective teamwork. Furthermore, I've observed that diversity tends to be more prevalent in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) compared to other factors (P-16).*

It is clear from the above quotation that CC more or less prevails in the organization. However, for internal collaboration, all the factors are equally important. The diversity element prevails more in HEIs. Another FGD participant agrees with the saying of P-16. However, the participant added that external collaboration is more important than internal collaboration. The participant further adds that collaboration is not always better for the organization. This response gathered the participant's attention. The participant expressed this concern,

*In response to your first question, I concur with P-16 that all 5 C's are of utmost importance for fostering internal collaboration. However, I would like to introduce another element: "Centric," which signifies a*



*student-centric approach. In the context of maintaining collaborative practices within higher education institutions, I believe that integrity is equally vital. Addressing your inquiry about the prevalence of internal collaboration, I do believe it is more commonly practiced than external collaboration. Nevertheless, for the sake of providing enhanced learning opportunities, I advocate for giving external collaboration a higher priority. It's worth noting that collaboration may not always yield optimal results. For example, there are instances where individual work outperforms teamwork, particularly among faculty members in my organization. Additionally, I've observed that in some cases, collaboration is pursued primarily for personal gain. Turning to the three factors you mentioned, at least the element of diversity is actively practiced within our organization. Diversity, encompassing age, gender, and culture, is evident. However, it's important to acknowledge that at times, diversity is practiced more as a formality to adhere to UGC guidelines, rather than as a deeply ingrained value (P-8).*

The opinion expressed by the participants demonstrates concern for internal collaboration. However, the participants believed that diversity tends to exist in academic institutions. Another FGD participant agrees with the statement given by P-16 and P-8. The participants opined that,

*I agree with P16's sentiments regarding the significance of internal collaboration, particularly emphasizing the 5 C's approach. In my view, internal collaboration necessitates a strong adherence to academic principles. Unfortunately, I have observed that some of our colleagues are actively involved in political parties within academic institutions. This involvement can significantly hinder internal collaboration, as political interference is widespread. Groups affiliated with one political party tend to resist working with those from other political affiliations. To keep it brief, as other speakers are addressing this issue, I want to emphasize the importance of maintaining a purely academic focus for internal collaboration. Shifting the focus to the three factors you mentioned, it is worth noting that teamwork is often approached with a negative perspective. Additionally, I also agree with others that, in comparison, diversity is relatively more prevalent within our organization compared to teamwork and trust (P-1).*

The response given by P-1 indicates that diversity is at least practiced in HEIs. However, the participants expressed problems with teamwork and trust. It indicates trust issues in the HEIs. Furthermore, another FGD participant agrees with the statement given by P-1. The following statements have been expressed by the participant,

*I can provide insights based on my experience in a government institution regarding collaborative culture. I find myself in agreement with the perspective shared by P-1. In our institution, faculty members are often grouped based on their political affiliations, and unfortunately, this arrangement has had a detrimental impact on our collaborative practices. The influence of politics has cast a shadow over the collaborative culture in nearly every sector. Whether it's the campus management committee, departmental leadership, or even the appointment of advisors, political considerations seem to be the driving force. Drawing from my own experiences, I have noticed that when projects or assignments are assigned to a team, only the designated leader assumes responsibility, while others may not actively participate. Consequently, teamwork doesn't consistently yield favorable results. Trust and teamwork appear to be lacking. However, it's important to note that, at the very least, we adhere to diversity practices to comply with government regulations (P-2).*

The expression of P-2 indicates that internal collaboration has been affected by organizational politics. Furthermore, the trust issue also seems to affect the collaborative practices within the organization. It also indicates that collaboration within the organization has been exercised as per the compliance measures enforced by the regulatory institution.

## Discussion

In the current study, teamwork emerged as a significant aspect of collaborative culture within HEIs. A majority of respondents expressed an average positive response toward teamwork, indicating its slim presence within the organization. This aligns with the findings of Ayenalem et al. (2022), who stressed the importance of collaboration between senior and junior faculty members in enhancing academic performance. Contrastingly, Acharya et al. (2019) reported that collaborative learning and activity-based inquiry have not been extensively practiced within

HEIs. This discrepancy suggests that while teamwork might be perceived positively in some instances, it may not be uniformly practiced across all HEIs. The differing results emphasize the need for further investigation into the specific factors that influence the implementation of teamwork within these institutions. Trust emerged also an important factor in the current study with good response, with a significant proportion of respondents expressing trust in their immediate seniors, colleagues, and organizational members.

This finding aligns with prior research by Islam et al. (2011), who highlighted the role of trust in knowledge-sharing behavior within organizations, including HEIs. In contrast, Barczak et al. (2010) presented contradictory findings, suggesting that the relationship between trust and creativity might not be straightforward. This inconsistency underlines the complexity of trust within HEIs and suggests that its impact on various aspects of collaboration may vary based on the specific context and organizational culture. The current study highlighted diversity as the most important factor of collaborative culture within HEIs, with respondents strongly agreeing that a diversified workforce leads to rational decision-making and enhances collaborative culture. This aligns with prior research by Shehzad (2022), which emphasized the significance of collaborative culture in Knowledge Management (KM) processes and innovation, particularly in diverse organizational settings. On the other hand, Omerzel et al. (2011) found contrasting results, indicating that trust and teamwork may not play significant roles in the knowledge management process. This discrepancy raises questions about the relationship between diversity and collaborative culture within HEIs and suggests that the impact of diversity may vary based on factors such as leadership and organizational context.

Qualitative findings from participants (P-16, P-8, P-1, P-2) emphasized the importance of internal collaboration, highlighting the 5 C's (commitment, conversation, communication, coordination, cooperation) as key to fostering collaboration. Diversity was valued but often practiced as a formality, while trust and teamwork faced challenges due to political interference and negative perceptions. Quantitative findings aligned, underscoring diversity's role in rational decision-making and collaborative culture. Both datasets revealed that while diversity, trust, and teamwork are essential, their genuine implementation is hindered by political influences and formalistic practices. The study highlights the importance of collaborative culture in HEIs but calls for deeper exploration into its practical challenges.

## **Conclusion**

The study provides a comprehensive understanding of the status and challenges of collaborative culture within higher education institutions in Pokhara. The findings reveal that collaborative culture, encompassing teamwork, trust, and diversity, is perceived positively by respondents, with diversity emerging as the most significant factor. Teamwork and trust, while valued, face challenges such as political interference, negative perceptions, and inconsistent practices. The qualitative data further highlight the complexities of fostering a genuinely collaborative culture, particularly in the context of internal collaboration, where political affiliations and formal compliance often hinder effective teamwork and trust-building. The study highlights the importance of diversity in promoting rational decision-making and enhancing collaborative culture, aligning with prior research that emphasizes the role of diversity in innovation and knowledge management. However, the qualitative insights reveal that diversity is sometimes practiced as a formality rather than a deeply ingrained value, indicating a gap between policy and practice. Trust, while generally positive, is influenced by organizational politics, and teamwork is often undermined by negative attitudes and a lack of genuine cooperation. The study paints a picture of collaborative culture in HEIs in Pokhara, highlighting its potential benefits while acknowledging the barriers to its effective implementation. The findings suggest that while collaborative culture is recognized as important, its practical application requires addressing underlying issues such as political interference, lack of trust, and negative perceptions of teamwork.

## **Implications**

The study highlights key implications for policyholders, faculty members, and institutional heads in Nepalese HEIs. Policyholders should design inclusive policies that promote genuine diversity, trust, and teamwork, ensuring compliance goes beyond formality. Faculty members must actively engage in collaborative practices, overcoming

negative perceptions and political influences to foster a culture of cooperation. Institutional heads play a critical role in modeling collaborative behavior, minimizing political interference, and creating transparent environments that prioritize commitment, conversation, communication, coordination, and cooperation. Collectively, these efforts can bridge the gap between policy and practice, enhancing collaborative culture and academic performance in HEIs.

## Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study's limitations include a small sample size from only eight institutions in Pokhara, relying on faculty perceptions, and not including student perspectives. The cross-sectional design also limits generalizability. Future research could expand the sample, include longitudinal studies, and explore the role of leadership, political influences, and technology in collaboration. Examining diversity practices and including students' views could provide a fuller understanding of collaborative culture in higher education.

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