

Siddhajyoti Interdisciplinary Journal (SIJ)

Vol. III, January, 2022

(A Peer Reviewed Open Access Research Journal)

ISSN: 2645-8381

Published by Research Management Cell, Siddhajyoti Education Campus Sindhuli

<https://www.nepjol.info/index.php/sij>

Teacher benchmarking: In the context of university concerning Nepal

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Article History: *Received:* 30 June 2021; *Reviewed:* 30 November 2021; *Accepted:* 10 December 2021

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore the practices of benchmarking teacher competencies in the higher educational institutions in Nepal. The amalgamated paper reviews on practices of benchmarking for Higher Education (HE) teachers among different institution(s) in Nepal; and finds teacher's professional skills, levels of formal qualification of teachers including content knowledge, professional aspiration, developing a thirst for innovations, and 21st-century teaching skills and its transference to learners as accepted areas to define their competencies. Subsequent exploration of practices, experiences of engaged professionals helped us to define the reality that enables the teacher to enter HE services in Nepal. The study reveals all Universities have set criterion to be fulfilled to enter HE teaching that includes; minimum formal academic years of learning (degree), professional experiences including publications (evidence), and required content knowledge and pedagogical skills (audited through an exam). In addition, 'acceptance' among students and higher social capital the 'political linkage were two non-specified areas with noted privilege for the candidate to join University teaching. These insights signal the need for a concisely defined competency framework for a conflict-free community of practice.

Keywords: Level of qualification; Pedagogical knowledge; Professional skills and knowledge; Teaching competencies

Introduction

It had been an agreed shift in teaching-learning (T/L) processes from the focus of "teaching" of past to a practice of "learning" which involves building together on defined competency (objectives) using the available information, knowledge, innovation, and technology. The changes demand teachers who can facilitate learning in different frontiers. No doubt, they must be skilled and with adequate competency for the purpose; but how do institutions help themselves find such teachers for T/L in HE?

In general understanding, teacher competencies include technical knowledge and skills, Pedagogical skills, and Content Knowledge (Koehler et al., 2017). Technological knowledge, skill, and competency are a growing domain for improved livelihood. The discipline

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Siddhajyoti Interdisciplinary Journal (Peer reviewed), Volume 3, January, 2022

(subject-specific) knowledge often referred to as cognition (Blooms et al., 1956) which enriches content aspects; attitude is represented by affective domain with different levels (Krathwohl et al., 1964) that defines personality including personal values; and mind and skill synchronization resulting performance remains an important entity of psychomotor domain (Harrow, 1972) development in education. All these developmental aspects frame the foundation of 'education' as well as a basic requirement towards making a successful teacher in higher education. Teachers having these aspects can facilitate learning in the education process. "Education is not preparation of life, education is life in itself" (Dewey, 1938) should be eventually reflected and transferred during the learning process. We could have continued this discussion reaching to define education to embody tangible skills as well as some abstract concepts within it, but for now, we take another domain: 'educating'. 'Educating' is a process of enriching scholars through T/L had never been an easy task. This demands thoughtful HE teachers, and their actions. On the other hand, the dynamic nature of HE with the changing functional role adds challenge to defining HE teachers' standards. In these scenarios, we evaluate it's high time to see existing benchmarks practices for the teachers in HE in Nepal. In this context, Selvi (2010) stated that teachers need to improve both the knowledge and skills to enhance their teaching skills to enhance classroom learning. However, there has been a debate (European Commission [EC], 2013) and accordingly varying standards of skills and knowledge for HE teachers. The concisely defined core competencies and their levels for the teachers not only assist educators enabling them to bring a positive change for students and their families but also enrich themselves. The quality of 'teacher' is directly connected to their teaching competencies which will assist to explore a deeper understanding of the learning process and mastering a width of teaching and assessment methods, together with the commitment to students' progress. Teacher competency is an important determinant or benchmark to ensure the quality of higher education (Molenaar et al., 2009). Among a few of the procedures of emphasizing teacher competencies, the benchmark is one common practice seen in higher education. The discussion generates a logic that the quality of HE in many ways is shaped by the competencies of the teachers engaged in the process.

Moreover, "the benchmark is a systematic way of evaluation of the knowledge and skills of the teacher to maintain the self-assurance and quality enhancement in higher education" (Henderson-Smart et al., 2006, p. 8). Whereas the explicit definitions vary widely; selected institutions take it as a self-improvement tool for organizations that allows them to compare themselves with others, to identify their comparative strengths and weaknesses, and learn how to improve (Achim et al., 2009). Similarly, Pattison (1994) states that benchmarking is a way of finding and adopting best practices that include participative, open, and collaborative evaluation of services and processes to emulate best available practice (as cited in Bhutta&Huq, 1999). Benchmarking includes a process comparing and measuring an organization with business leaders anywhere, which will help the organization take action to improve its performance (Pattison, 1994). The Finnish education known for their educational efficiency explains benchmark as a process to compare their services, activities, and results to identify their comparative strengths and weaknesses as a basis for self-improvement and/or self-regulation to ensure better and smatter institutions (Kleemola et al., 2010). The processes are not only confined to practices but also include educational policies to improve the quality of education controlling the processes to assure the quality and the standards a step further. The

range of definitions shows benchmarking practices can be of national, international, and of a university themselves or joint with consulting services (Vught et al., 2008) with the relevant organization.

Methodology

This inquiry attracts its meaning through the interpretation of narratives from participants- HE teachers, who are rich sources for knowing and making meaning (Dwyer & Emerland, 2017) towards understanding reality. Aligned with the convention of narrative inquiry, the study takes lived storylines as the point of excavation (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and ultimate words and stories of participants (Fontana & Frey, 1994) to draw meanings. The teachers participating in the inquiry shared their T/L practice including the process of their journey to be a teacher revealing their glory and pains (Webster & Mertova, 2007). They became ‘storytellers’ (Webster & Mertova, 2007), ultimately portraying the HE recruitment ‘inside and outside’ stories at Universities in Nepal. Listening to the storylines, mostly uninterrupted narratives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) with a focus on the uniqueness of the individual (Dwyer & Emerland, 2017) as well as with full interaction took us deeper enabling us to portray the practices (in Nepalese Universities) in this article.

To avoid our residual positivism, biasness, and or empathetic override, we had a critical and reflexive discussion (Fischer, 2008) during every nub in the paper. Semi-structured and informal interview-seeking experiences were used to help participants Ram and Rina to make an uninterrupted storyline. These names were pseudo of our participants due to anonymity purposes. They engaged as a Professor in one of the constituent colleges of the TU. However, we only collected the information about benchmarking in the teacher recruitment with them. So the most of the information is obtained from the literature review, and it contributed us to generating four themes in this paper for analyzing and discussing purposes. These themes are elucidated as teacher's competencies and academic rigor, benchmarking and teacher's competencies, policy to practices about benchmarking, and benchmarking in the teacher recruitment. Finally, the analysis and discussion process contributed us to deriving the conclusions at the end parts of this paper.

Results and Discussions

Teacher's Competencies and Academic Rigor

Academic professionals with their services make the backbone of academic institutions (McManus et al., 2013) towards building an academic community. Academic professionals in a major imply ‘teachers’ that include the major service provider group of academic institutions. Teaching-learning (T/L) is the major academic service as well as the identity of an academic institution. It is because; ‘teachers’ ability and wisdom in handling the learning activities will have a direct impact on students’ active involvement in learning’ (Copriady, 2014, p. 312). Teacher’s competency in T/L not only defines the success of scholars, but has wider implications towards making academics, country, and global identity. Teachers’ competencies may have different measures; looking at the views of Nepalese students, they agree to a point that ‘good teacher’ delivers ‘effective lesson’. Students define effective lessons are those where the delivery (mostly the classroom lecture) of a teacher makes them feel understood (of content) and aware of its possible application area. Though it is not a complete and formal way of defining competence, ‘acceptance’ of teachers remains important in the Nepalese context. ‘Competency’ as a mixture of necessary knowledge and personality allows

teachers to solve the problems efficiently in the corresponding field of knowledge, scientific or practical activity (Malikova, 2014) largely are part of students' learning. Teaching effectiveness expands with the expansion and combination of professional training and personal qualities of the teacher. In nutshell, teacher competencies complement academic rigor, and both are expandable aspects in the process.

The three domains (knowledge, skills, and attitude) are key to making them competent professionals in teaching. Teaching competency is a personal component of professionalism having the quality of specialist's preparation, practical representation of education content modernization, basic components of a teacher's pedagogic culture, and a new approach towards constructing educational standards (Abykanova et al., 2016). The list indicates it is acquirable. In supporting their claim on the teacher competencies, Selvi (2010) says;

"Teachers need to improve knowledge and skills to enhance, improve and explore their teaching practices. Many of the studies on the competencies of teachers focus on the teaching role of teachers in the classroom rather than teachers 'competencies. Teachers' competencies have been broadening concerning reform studies in education, development of teacher's education, scientific results of educational science and other fields (p. 167)."

Hence, it is indeed true that teacher needs to develop their knowledge and skills to enrich their teaching profession. The teacher competencies play a vital role to empower the students during classroom practices. To ensure quality teachers in higher education, there are required benchmarks to recruit competent teachers in the institutions of the country. In the process of teacher recruitment in Nepal, the higher education system has the minimum eligibility criteria for teaching faculty where they need to have a master's degree in the area in which the candidate will be teaching, with a standard average score of at least 50% and to be promoted to associate professor (or reader) or professor, a lecturer must have 5 years or more experience, preferably with research and publications, as well as a PhD (Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2017). Thus, the eligibility criteria can enhance the quality of the teaching faculty on the one hand and the other hand; it improves the standards of higher education among its competitor. The teacher competency enables them to act professionally with the appropriate knowledge and skills (Koster&Dengerink, 2008). Therefore, the well-trained, competent leadership skills and the master's degree candidate can better serve the students in higher education (National Education Planning Commission [NEPC], 1956). Similarly, According to School Sector Reform Plan (SSRP) policy:

"The plan already laid down indicative policies on various fields of teacher development that read as i) selection and recruitment; ii) qualification requirement; iii) teachers preparation; iv) in-service teachers development; v) career path and promotion; vi) specialized teaching cadres; vii) teacher performance monitoring; and viii) headteacher selection and training requirement. The underlying spirit of the provisions has called for critical shifts in terms of teachers' service, professional preparation for teaching, and accountability for result of teaching" (p. 6).

In the same way, Henard and Roseveare (2012) also state that the teaching can be manifested through a wide range of activities such as teaching requirement criteria, professional development activities (in-service training for faculty), competency-based assessments to support for the quality higher education, etc. Thus, the recruitment criteria can help them to select a competent and professional teacher who can empower the teaching profession. In the

same way, Shrestha (2005) states that most of the class in our higher education consists of lectures and follow the traditional method of teaching and learning instead of seminars and class discussions along with the reading assignments, drafting term papers, project work, and case studies. What is important is that these practices are only conducted by competent teachers in higher education. Thus, the teachers need to be trained to acknowledge the updated new teaching methods. It moreover helps to improve the quality of higher education in the teaching and learning process.

Benchmarking and Teacher's Competencies

Benchmark in different practices among EU, has set teacher competencies along with the learning goals (Vught et al., 2008). The paper along with this reference makes an explicit revision of literature around benchmark towards exploring the teacher competency practices in higher education in the context of Nepal. Here, the benchmarks are called the indicators such as qualification of teacher, roles, training, etc. These indicators of the benchmarks measure the performance of the teacher in the teaching profession. Hence, the teacher competency in higher education is always concerned with the student learning achievements of the institutions as well as the quality of the higher education among its competitor. To prioritize quality teaching as a strategic objective, the HE is to set quality teaching as a strategic objective for the institution to signal the institution's commitment to fostering continuous improvement in teaching (Hénard & Roseveare, 2012). It is believed that competent teachers can only contribute to producing quality students in the country. Thus, the issues of teacher competency benchmark have always come first to ensure the quality of higher education. Higher education is the intellectual place where students construct or gain knowledge that can meet their as well as parents' expectations, find industrial relations; extend collaboration, and the networking with each other.

If we study the history of higher education in the context of Nepal, it started in 1818 AD from the establishment of Trichandra College (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2010). In our observation, the national educational system where the formal education structure of Nepal consists of eight years of basic education (grades 1-8), four years of secondary education (grades 9-12), and three to seven years of higher education (Bachelor, Masters, and M Phil). Likewise, there is a provision of a separate technical education of one and half years to three years such as Technical School Leaving Certificate and Diploma in Technical and Vocational Training (MOE, 2013). Although there are lots of higher education institutions including public, and private universities, the number of student migration is currently increasing in the country. Regarding higher education in Nepal, there are TU, Kathmandu University (KU), Purbanchal University (PU), Pokhara University (PU), Lumbini University (LU), Mid-Western University (MWU), Far western University (FWU), Agriculture and Forestry University (AFU), Health Academics along with the 60 TU constituent and 982 affiliated campuses with a total regular enrolment of about 382,000 students with 84.4 percent of the regular enrolment (MOE, 2010). However, there is always debate on the quality of education provided by these institutions in the country. The aims of higher education in Nepal are to improve the competitive skill manpower, to develop the knowledge through effective research skills; it still lacks these achievements in the higher education graduates in Nepal (MOE, 2010). I have delimited my study in the higher education of Nepal. The higher education is only three

to seven years of higher education now, but it was 11th to 12th grade after the school leaving certificate before the 8th education amendment 2073.

Policy to Practices about Benchmarking

The policy review section, follow keyword search for all relevant educational document, whole content review of higher education policy- 2072 (MOE, 2010), and TU Act- 2049 (Nepal Law Commission [NLC], 1992) and regulation through content and context analysis as well as policy mapping from teacher benchmark lens; where the academic competency, quality assurance, and accreditation are the main grounds to appoint and promote the quality teacher in the higher education. To assure teacher competency, the higher education policy, 2072 has attracted the teaching profession by providing teacher training, seminar, and workshop to ensure their quality in the teaching profession. It moreover emphasized the quality of the teacher, professional skills, knowledge, and experiences to enrich the competency of the teacher in their profession. In the same way, KU Act (NLC, 1991) has determined the minimum qualification of the teacher of all different levels to recruit the right and qualified teachers. The Service Commission shall take academic competency and experience as the main grounds for making appointments, and promotion of teachers. It needs to consider administrative efficiency and experience as the main grounds for making appointments and promoting employees. On the other hand, the university grants commission of the higher institutions has policies of monitoring and evaluating the performance of the institution to measure the competency-based performance of our country. Therefore, the higher institution will be successful to provide quality education to its students once they implement those policies in their institutions. According to the Asian Development Bank (2017),

"In Nepal, all teachers are required to be licensed through the Teacher Service Commission before they can be appointed to a teaching job. Since this is done through the Teacher Service Commission, it is applied only to government teachers. While there is general intention to improve and strengthen the current teacher registration and licensing in all countries, the technical knowledge and the political will to achieve this reform are lacking" (p. 21).

Benchmarking in the Teacher Recruitment

The higher education policy-2072 (MOE, 2015) has also outlined the selection of the teacher to ensure the quality of the teacher in the higher educational institutions in Nepal. Here, HE, means the academic institutions providing higher education, which includes universities, deemed universities, and affiliated campuses (Paudyal, 2016). The quality of the higher educational institution is identified by the University Grant Commission (UGC) from the year 2007, which enables HE to recognize it as having met some predetermined minimal criteria or standard (UGC, 2012). The teacher competency in higher education is a mixture of necessary knowledge of the teacher and personality qualities which will enrich them to become self-motivated, self-directed, and establish as professional teachers in the higher educational institutions (Malikova, 2014). Thus, teaching competency is both the combination of professional training and personal qualities of a teacher in the teaching profession. The knowledge and skills are key to making them competent in the teaching profession. However, the selection of teachers is not implemented in the higher educational institutions in Nepal. I visited one of the constituent colleges of Tribhuvan University for

data collection purposes, which are situated in Kathmandu. I interviewed the first participant, the principal of that college, Ram (Pseudo name) about my topic. He said, *"We are following the higher education policy as per the rules and regulation of the higher education act to select the teaching faculty to ensure the quality teaching in their institution. However, there are gaps between the government policy and the current practices of our institution to establish teacher competency in higher education. He moreover said that the minimum qualifications for the teaching faculty are to pass the master's degree along with 2 to 3 years of professional experience in the related subjects. And, he also stresses the roles and the responsibilities of the teachers as they are not serious in their duty and responsibilities even; they are contracted before the recruitment"*.

Likewise, I also took an interview of my second participation, Mrs, Rina (name changed). She said, *"The lack of the teacher training and seminar are the key reason to continue the theory-based education instead of the practical education in higher education. Most importantly, the unhealthy practices such as influences of the political leaders, student union, nepotism, etc .in recruiting the teaching faculty have also weakened the competency of the teacher in the higher education."*

Similarly, I used the article to explain the current practices of teacher competency in the higher education of Nepal. The quality of higher education has been decreasing as the master's degree is the start point to enter higher education teaching (Bhusal, 2011), lack of prior knowledge and experience on higher education services challenges the teacher for quality facilitation towards learning. Moreover, a good number of teachers can enter university teaching with their social and political influences (Bhusal, 2011). The teacher on the other hand finds them demotivated. Their professional benefits including the salary quite often make them frustrated towards the teaching professions (Bhusal, 2011). The knowledge, skills, and commitment of teachers, as well as the quality of school leadership, are the most important factors in achieving high-quality educational outcomes in higher education (EU, 2013). Most of higher education in the world is currently practiced to recruit the most professional teachers as their faculty. Moreover, they prioritized those teachers who have got the required knowledge and professional skills of the related subjects in higher education. In the context of Nepal, the teacher hiring process may seem unfair due to various reasons such as political power, nepotism, etc. However, there is a teacher service commission and required criteria; they still are not able to recruit competent teachers in higher education, which can be seen from the result of the higher education in Nepal. The University of our Country has become the think tank to produce thousands of unemployed people for the country. To select the right teacher, Abykanova et al. (2016) focus on professionalism, training, and the teacher's pedagogic culture and a new approach towards constructing educational standards in the teaching profession. If the teachers have professional training, understanding of the pedagogic knowledge, and required skills, they can successfully deliver the lesson into the class. The selection process also needs to understand their skills and knowledge to recruit professional teachers in the higher institutions in the country.

As we all know that to determine the successful teachers in higher education, the teaching and learning skills and knowledge are counted a lot for them (Copriady, 2014). Further, he stresses to their ability and insight wisdom to handle the learning activities will have a positive influence on students' active involvement in learning activities. Hence, the

HE teacher recruitment process is determined by the rules and regulations of the university act and its educational policy in our country. In doing so, the introduction of Quality Assurance and Accreditation (QAA) under the Quality Assurance and Accreditation Committee (QAAC) in the year 2007 is considered as an important aspect of Nepalese higher education reform (UGC, 2012). It is also vital to recruit professional and competent teachers in HE. Since they are being responsible to teach and guide the students properly in the countries. Connecting to it, ensuring knowledge and skills for quality teachers, it needs to discuss the prospect of benchmarking rationale/implications rather than bringing the same issues in this study.

A highly qualified and professional teacher can lead to positive individual student development. Here, professional competencies mean knowledge and understanding the students and their learning, course-related knowledge and its systems, and their role and responsibilities. Thus, teachers' competency in teaching professions such as knowledge of learning, teaching methods, and curriculum have been found a great influence on teaching performance in HE. It even has stronger effects on their learning to ensure the quality of education in the higher education institutions in Nepal. However, Nepal witnessed massive privatization since, 1990 which gave birth to varieties of higher education institutions and programs on a large scale which deteriorated the quality of higher education (Paudyal, 2016). Furthermore, it enriches the success of the T/L activities in the classroom. Similarly, the high level of academic qualification and the experiences of teaching job can also ensure the quality teacher in the higher education, that is why, the higher education teacher requires minimum eligibility criteria for teaching faculty for instance the teacher must have a master's degree in the area in which the candidate will be teaching along with at least 5 years or more teaching experience (ADB, 2015). It is indeed true that the success of a teacher is mostly determined by the success of the students; therefore, the competent knowledge and skills of the teachers have always ensured the quality of the teaching and learning activities. The higher education policy, 2072 of TU has established the quality assurance accreditation policy to ensure the quality and professional teaching profession in Nepal. It has talked about effective teacher training, seminar, and workshop to sharpen the knowledge and skills of teachers in higher institutions. It can also enhance the quality of the teachers in the teaching profession. Therefore, the ability and learning activities are vital in learning activities in the T/L practices at HE. We agree with the statement of the higher education policy which has also strongly emphasized the professional carrier in the teaching profession to attract skilled teachers in teaching professions.

To ensure the quality of higher education, the policy level and the practices are key to developing and implementing the guidelines of the teacher competencies in the country. It is indeed true that the quality of higher education depends on the performance of the teaching faculty and their output in the higher institutions. However, the direct political interruption in the higher institutions and the low salary of the teacher disappointed their teaching professions which are currently practicing recruitment and selection practices in the country. Thus, it is true that the selections of the teachers are quite a bias in our higher education, however, the higher education policy and the university acts have their competitive recruiting policy in the country. Thus, the teacher needs to be competent and professional in the related subject matter to foster the quality of education in higher education. The master level qualification along with the professional experiences is the common practice to ensure the quality faculty selection in higher education of Nepal. They also need to take to provide competent teaching

faculty, higher education has demanded the required level of qualification, professional experiences, leadership skills, dedication, and training, and so on seminars and training to empower their teaching professions. They will equip with practical knowledge and skills in the specific subject through the seminars and the training program. Similarly, the well-trained and professional leadership skills of the faculty are needed to maintain teacher competency because it plays a vital role to improve the quality of education in higher education.

Similarly, my participation, Rina mentioned that the lack of teacher training and required knowledge made our teachers less capable to provide quality education in higher education, on the one hand, and the other hand, the unhealthy practices such as influences of the political leaders, student union and nepotism in recruiting the teaching faculty that have also weakened the competency of the teacher in the higher education, however, the higher education policy is opposed to the current system of recruiting the teachers. The knowledge, skills, and commitment of teachers are ensured to establish the teaching faculty as the competent faculty in the teaching profession. On the other hand, it makes them responsible and devoted to their profession. Most importantly, the competent teacher can only apply modern teaching methods such as seminars, discussion, assignments, project work, etc during the class in higher education. However, there has been the unhealthy practice of selecting the higher education faculty in our country Nepal due to the establishment of the political union in higher education. Furthermore, the teachers are frustrated with their job and responsibilities because they are paid very low in their job. Even the government has brought different policies and programs to establish teacher competency in higher education; it will not be effective until the teachers are satisfied and responsible towards their professions. In addition, the recruitment process of the teaching faculty and the training for the professional developments for them are required to enhance the teacher competency in the teaching faculty in the higher institutions.

It is still doubted that whether higher education in implementing the education policies to ensure teacher competency or not? It is, however, true that the quality of higher education is very poor in comparison to the other world. This paper presents the literature and theory which is related to teachers' competency on the one hand. On the other hand, it explains the university acts and teacher commission policies to develop the teacher competency-based education in higher education, however, the ignorance and challenges of the implementation of policy and the continuing the traditional way of recruiting of the teachers are common practices in higher education of Nepal. There have been questions of poor quality of education in higher education in our country due to the lack of the required level of teacher competency in our higher education. Although the selection of competent teachers has been attempted, it is far to go for the implementation in our higher education. Therefore, the educational outcome of the university is always seen as less productive than it is expected.

Conclusion

Therefore, with the above discussion, it is quite clear that teacher competency is the key factor to influence the quality of higher education. The required training, professional development skills, and qualification are important to develop teacher competency. Although there are policies and efforts from the government to improve the teacher competencies in higher education, the practices of teacher competency have still been lacking in higher education due to the poor implementation policy and the frustration of the teacher towards their

profession. It is indeed true that teachers' competency in teaching and learning always ensures the quality of education and teachers in higher education institutions. Moreover, it enriches the effective T/L activities in the classroom. However, there have been questions of poor quality of education in higher education in our country, the selection of competent teachers has been attempted to ensure the quality education so far from the policy level of the government.

Though we need dynamicity, maybe revisiting on a temporal basis benchmarking could help to ensure the quality of learning in HE; we need a system of benchmarking and practicing it fully, which is not truly considered in our system. Moreover, we say our standards are very low compared to the following standards in comparison to global standards benchmarking practices. These ways of practice have helped these universities to upgrade so are the implication for the Nepalese context from this study.

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