BETWEEN POLITICAL *AKHADA* AND MARKET FAILURE: UNDERSTANDING THE DECLINE OF NEPAL'S PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION AND STRATEGIES FOR TRUST RECOVERY

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper critically examines the decline of Nepal's public higher education system, arguing that universities have become trapped between politicization and failed market reforms. Once envisioned as public institutions serving communities for nation building, they now face a profound legitimacy deficit among its stakeholders. We intend to highlight the structural and cultural roots of market failure and to suggest ways out for rebuilding public trust in higher education.

Design/methodology/approach – Following a desk-review method, we critically synthesized the extant literature, policy documents and socio-cultural narratives around higher education in Nepal. This study also draws on the global debates about the eroding trust on public universities and makes cultural critique of the dark academia to situate the case of Nepal.

Findings – Nepali HEIs experience system-wide problems such as a weak theory work link, under investment in student support and role ambiguity toward national development. Public universities increasingly are "zombie institutions," characterized by the performance of the outward forms of academic life, undermined within by managerialism, political hegemonization and a corrupted performativity. All of this is at the expense of academic

independence and tradition from which student enrollment falls as well distant from the community needs.

Research limitations/implications – This study is primarily a perspective paper developed out of secondary sources and thus lacks primary stakeholders first hand voices. Future research could deepen this discourse by unpacking multi-stakeholders' lived experiences on the dynamics explored by this research.

Practical implications – The discussion underscore the critical need for HEI reform strategies that emphasizes transparency, depoliticization, and community engagement. It's high time universities reimagined themselves as civic institutions that cultivate trust and intellectual vitality, rather than become an arena for political patronage.

Originality/value – This study has synthesized the global theoretical discourse on declining public universities and the everyday realities of Nepali public universities. By doing so, it contributes to scholarship by foregrounding trust recovery as a key strategy for revitalizing public universities in Nepal.

***Keywords*:** Public universities; Nepal; politicization; market failure; higher education reform

Introduction: A System in Crisis

Nepal's current public higher education system stands at a critical juncture, caught between entrenched political intervention and partial, often extractive, character of market reforms that have eroded its capacity to serve as a credible space for learning, scholarship, and social mobility. The tangible realities of day-to-day governance, program trade-offs, and students' disenchantment are not but exceptions to the norm, but rather indications of profound structural and cultural anomalies in university governance, funding, and imagination. This paper takes these visible manifestations of decline as an entry point to illuminate the underlying political–economic arrangements, organizational cultures, and historical legacies that have normalized disruption, patronage, and market opportunism within public institutions. The objectives of this study are, firstly, to uncover and discuss structurally and culturally the deep-seated causes of the current loss of public confidence in the Nepal public higher education; and, secondly, to advance context-specific strategies to revamp confidence—a new vision for governance, accountability, and scholarship to reposition universities to move forward from a condition of suspended animation between politics and markets to become a source of revitalized public confidence.

Scene Setting

It was early September, just a few weeks prior to Dashain, when the campus should have been buzzing with chatter and academic zeal, yet an uneasy stillness hung over the university grounds. Upon the walls, students notices no longer called for seminars, reading circles or research colloquia; instead they announced protests in the coming days, party meetings and election campaigns of rival student unions whose priorities had shifted far from academic

concerns. Outside the central office, a small crowd of students waited not for academic advising but for signatures and recommendations brokered through partisan networks, while several faculty members quietly discussed the likelihood of yet another disruption triggered by leadership appointments negotiated in party headquarters rather than in academic councils.

Inside the classrooms, market logics had seeped in without delivering the promised efficiency or quality. Conversations among students oscillated between plans to go abroad and the latest offers from private consultancies, as if the public university had become a mere staging ground for exit rather than a site of genuine learning and social mobility. Fee-paying programs and short-term market-oriented courses had multiplied, but they did little to restore trust; instead, they deepened a sense that higher education was being sold without a corresponding commitment to public purpose. In this in-between space—where political battlegrounds dominated governance and market reforms hollowed out academic ideals—the slow, quiet decline of Nepal's public higher education felt less like a sudden crisis and more like an ongoing erosion of confidence in the very institutions meant to serve the public good.

- Anecdote#1 from the Second Author

In the above scene as observed by the second author, it can clearly be seen that the higher education institutions in Nepal have strayed away from their original mission of nurturing robust education, scholarship, and public service — they have remained in an in-between space where neither politics nor markets produce genuine academic value. Instead of being autonomous hubs of knowledge, they are becoming mere extensive platforms of political lobbying where appointments, program decisions, and even the academic calendar are subject to political

bargaining and street power. Market-oriented programs and fee-based initiatives on top of this politicized foundation haven't prioritized quality, equity, or relevance, yet have similarly rendered higher education into a transactional passage rather than a transformative public good. In this state of liminality, the institutions have been busy, but not productive: busy with protests, alignments, and revenue schemes, which have left them incapable of providing stable, trustworthy learning environments, credible credentials, or meaningful intellectual leadership to society.

Background

Nepal's public higher education system, which was once a beacon of hope and a critical mechanism for nation-building in the post-1950s and social mobility, is at a critical juncture. Entities such as Tribhuvan University (TU), one of the country's largest and oldest institutions, was established to uphold a social contract: to cultivate an educated citizenry, produce skilled professionals for national development, and act as impartial spaces for critical thought and innovation. This pact has been fundamentally broken. These universities are often seen today as places of institutional morass, political battlegrounds and academia retreats, wrestling to maintain student enrollment, faculty morale and public confidence following the explosion of private colleges and a slow brain drain of students who want to study abroad. Nepal's unbridled growth of institutes of higher learning (e.g., increasing number of federal and provincial universities) have bred duplication and mediocrity, eroded credibility and pushed students abroad. Foreign-funded colleges — with the support of MoEST (approval) and UGC (QAA recognition)— accelerate this exodus and TU and UGC do not have professionals who can discern the crisis—leading TU to lose its global position gradually (The Rising Nepal, 2025). In

addition, graduates experience a widening gap between education and jobs as degrees do not support the needs of the market. Without a national framework, Nepal's universities fail to meet Nepal's aspirations, leading discontented students to seek employment overseas and leading to campus closures (Wagle, 2022). This has led to the constant declining of public trust on Nepali HEIs in general and on public HEIs in particular.

This paper argues that the declining trust on Nepal's public universities cannot be attributed to a single cause but is the product of a pernicious double bind: capture by a culture of intense political factionalism (*akhada*) and the haphazard imposition of quasi-market reforms that have failed to improve quality or efficiency. Akhada – a physical term – is literally a wrestling arena, but it is also a metaphor explaining the way that universities have been turned into zero-sum competition sites for political control, where appointments, promotions, contracts, and even curricular decisions are dictated by partisan loyalty rather than merit or pedagogical soundness. At the same time, as they have been subject to donor-driven policy pressures, these institutions have been given a superficial layer of market-oriented managerialism—performance indicators, revenue-generation pressures, and corporate-style governance—that provides them with no autonomy, accountability, or ethical foundation. This hybrid has created "zombie institutions" (Crawford, 2020) – bodies that walk and talk like universities, conferring degrees and holding convocations, but whose core academic soul has been hollowed out.

The result is a profound trust deficit. Key stakeholders—students, parents, employers, academics, and the broader public—are increasingly seeing public universities as corrupt, irrelevant to the job market, and detached from community needs. This erosion of legitimacy threatens their very raison d'être. This paper takes a critical-interpretive approach to investigate

this crisis by bringing together policy documents, secondary literature, and cultural critique. It places Nepal's case in the context of global debates on the neoliberal erosion of the public university (Brown, 2015; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004) and deploys a metaphorical lens of "Dark Academia"—a cultural motif highlighting decay, performativity, and lost idealism in academic life—to illuminate its internal cultural decay. The central research question is: How have the twin forces of political battlegrounds and market failure precipitated a trust crisis in Nepal's public higher education, and what strategies can facilitate trust recovery?

The paper proceeds as follows. First, it outlines the theoretical framework, marrying global critiques of university decline with the local concept of *akhada*. Second, it offers a historical context tracing the evolution from a national-building project to a politicized and marketized entity. Third, it diagnoses the current symptoms of institutional decay, examining governance, academia, and the student experience. Fourth, it conceptualizes the outcomes, framing universities as zombie institutions suffering a legitimacy crisis. Finally, it proposes a pathway for trust recovery, arguing for a reclamation of the university's civic purpose through depoliticization, community-engaged scholarship, and ethical leadership.

The Political Akhada: Localizing the Crisis

The global pressures of marketization interact catastrophically with a local pathology: the *political akhada*. In Nepal, universities, particularly TU, have been deeply enmeshed in the nation's volatile party politics since the democratization movements. The *akhada* manifests as:

Partisan Capture: Vice-chancellors, registrars, deans, and even department heads are appointed based on political patronage instead of academic leadership.

Union Politicization: Student and teacher unions function as direct extensions of national political parties, frequently focused on strikes, agitation, and access to resources (admissions, contracts, construction), not academic welfare (Khanal, 2017).

Patronage Networks: A sprawling patronage network promotes positions, research grants, and procurement contracts according to party lines, rooting corruption into the system and weakening meritocracy.

Meritocracy in theory: Nepal has just adopted a corporate-style appointment system, whereby a search committee ensures transparency and holds an analysis of public applications, interviews, vision papers for recommendation of three candidates through merit rating. Although these formalized procedures exist, the prime minister still has personal discretion in who is selected, thus leaving this system exposed to political lobbying, preferential scoring, and allegations of fixed results (Bista, 2025).

This *akhada* culture pre-dates and corrupts market reforms. As a result, managerial tools like performance metrics become new weapons in the political fight: tools to reward loyalists and punish dissenters instead of tools to improve. The outcome is an unhealthy mash-up: a university prey to the worst of both worlds — the inefficiency and corruption of political capture, and the alienation and injustice of badly applied market logic, with the benefits of neither.

Theoretical Lenses: Power Resource and Institutional Trust Theories

To read Nepal's crisis, we have to situate it within the contexts of intersecting theoretical discourses that clarify the partisan pressures on public universities and public distrust.

Partisan and Power-Resource Theories

Partisan theory and power-resource theory give us insight into how the campus scene above (anecdote#1) mirrors how universities are structurally configured as appendages of party competition, rather than an autonomous academic community. Party-connected student and employee unions negotiate access as gatekeepers: they wield institutional appointments, contracts and programme approvals like political levers so that governance reform and everyday decisions become arenas of partisan bargaining, rather than academic deliberation (Bista, 2025; Dhakal, 2019; Ordorika, 2014; Vukasović, 2014). Control over a number of central leadership profiles (e.g., vice-chancellors, deans, campus chiefs) serves as a resource of power by which parties can share the spoils or loyal cadre, and reproduce power, thus rendering the formal institutional structures by collegial rule ineffective, and reinforcing deeply partisan logics throughout the university's organisational routines (Austin & Jones 2016; Pusser 2006). This politicised base is supplemented with neoliberal, market-focused institutions of payment that include fee-based projects and consultancies that, in practice and design, often produce institutions that, though appearing active, deviate from their original pedagogy (Lynch, 2006; Marginson, 2013).

Institutional Trust Theories

Institutional trust theories, on the other hand, explain how these dynamics undermine stakeholder trust in the cardinal dimensions of reliability, integrity, capability, and benevolence (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999). Frequent politically driven disruptions, partisan appointments and opaque decision-making erode perceptions that universities can be counted upon to provide stable, fair and procedurally just environments, detrimental to both reliability and integrity. The proliferation of programs without robust quality assurance,

alongside weak labour-market outcomes and high out-migration, raises doubts about institutional capability, while the perception that universities serve parties and insiders more than students and the wider public calls into question their benevolence (van Maele et al., 2014; Zmerli & Newton, 2008).

The ultimate casualty of this hybrid failure is *trust*. Following Fukuyama (1995) and Sztompka (1999), trust is the social glue that reduces transaction costs and enables cooperative action within institutions. Institutional trust is based on perceptions of competence, integrity, and benevolence. The decline of Nepal's public universities is a catastrophic drain of this social capital. The analysis that follows traces how the *akhada*-market failure nexus systematically destroys the foundations of stakeholder trust.

Recent work that focuses on trust in higher education suggests that rebuilding trust demands tangible changes to governance and culture: insulation of core academic leadership from direct party control, institutionalization of transparent and merit-based appointments, stabilisation of academic calendars, and the construction of rigorous mechanisms for accountability and authentic stakeholder voice that over time, demonstrate universities to act with competence and in the public interest (Fitzmaurice, 2020; O'Neill, 2002; Sztompka, 1999). Through this combined lens, the case of Nepal's public universities appears not as a series of isolated crises but as the predictable outcome of politicized power struggles and distorted marketisation—and, crucially, as a field where carefully designed institutional reforms can gradually restore public trust.

The popular cultural aesthetic of "Dark Academia" also lends itself to a metaphorical lens through which we can view the internal state of cultural decay. It romanticizes but also critiques

a world of elite, cloistered education, emphasizing obsession with tradition, aestheticized scholarship, moral decay and a disconnect between lofty ideals and corrupt realities. Although a literary and online subculture, its motifs — gothic architecture concealing internal rot, performative intellectualism free of real inquiry, and closed-door communities of competition — resonate with a critique of modern universities as places of "melancholy" and lost promise (Crawford, 2021). Within a Nepali context, we could refract this to consider the grand, sometimes dilapidated, campuses of universities as actual manifestations of this decay, where the ritual of exam and degree rites of passage persist, as real intellectual vigor and ethical purpose wither.

Besides the above two theories, the **neoliberal knowledge economy** also has influenced the functioning of universities. Globally, the late 20th century saw a fundamental shift in the philosophy of higher education. In a neoliberal knowledge economy, a 'human capital' model (p.5) has become ever more dominant (Olssen & Peters, 2005) in order to overcome the old 'public good' model, which saw education as the public good investment of an enlightened public. In this model, universities are reconceived as service-industry firms, students as consumers and human capital, and knowledge as a commodified product for economic competitiveness. This shift ushered in:

• Managerialism: The substitution of collegial governance with top-down, corporate management oriented towards metrics, efficiency, and audit culture (Shore & Wright, 2015).

• Marketization: The creation of competition; tuition fees; a focus on cash-rich forms of revenue, such as consultancy and market-responsive programs.

• Performativity: An obsession with measurable outcomes (publication count, graduate employability, rankings) that replaces legitimate intellectual or pedagogical content (Ball, 2003).

These reforms have promised to be efficient and relevant, but critics of course, also have claimed that they have generally undermined academic freedom, de-professionalized staff, deepened inequality and undermined the university's crucial social role (Giroux, 2014). In the Global South, these models were often imported by means of structural adjustment programs and donor conditionalities, resulting in what scholars refer to as "isomorphic mimicry" (Andrews et al., 2017)—taking on the characteristics of successful institutions but lacking their functionality.

Historical Context: From Nation-Building to Politics and Marketplace

Nepal's public higher education trajectory parallels the political history of the country, from an instrument of Rana and later Panchayat consolidation to a site of conflict within a fractious democracy and post-conflict state.

The Foundational Era (1918-1990)

It served distinct political purposes with the founding of Trichandra College (1918) and Tribhuvan University (1959). Initially, it produced a clerical class for the Rana regime. Under the Panchayat system (1960-1990), TU was centralized as an instrument for promoting a singular "national" culture and producing bureaucrats for a tightly controlled state apparatus. While access was limited and criticism stifled, the university maintained a certain elite prestige and was relatively insulated from open partisan squabbling, functioning under the monarch's direct oversight.

The Democratic Expansion and Politicization (1990-2006)

The 1990 People's Movement unleashed multiparty democracy and a rapid, unplanned expansion of public higher education. Campuses proliferated across the country, massively increasing access. However, this expansion was not matched by resources or strategic planning. Importantly, political parties viewed the university as a primary venue for recruiting youth, mobilizing support and distributing patronage. Student unions—once forums for debate—turned into tightly controlled branches of major parties. Appointments of senior officials became valuables as political spoils, anchoring the akhada culture in the DNA of governance within the university (Bhatta, 2011). Education quality began its steep decline amidst constant strikes (*bandhs*) and institutional instability.

The Post-Conflict and Market-Influence Era (2006-Present)

Following the 2006 peace agreement and the subsequent federal republican restructuring, the context shifted again. The state's capacity was stretched thin, and donor agencies (World Bank, Asian Development Bank) pushed for reforms emphasizing "quality," "relevance," and "financial sustainability." This period saw the uncritical import of market-oriented policies: proposals for autonomous boards, increased cost-sharing, and industry-linked curricula. However, these were grafted onto the deeply politicized *akhada* structure. The result was a bizarre duality: rhetoric of excellence and global standards coexisting with a reality of political interference, ghost teachers, leaking exam papers, and campuses paralyzed by union rivalries.

The social contract had been violated; the university was no longer regarded as a service to society, but rather as competing factions in a collapsing market.

Initiatives for Curriculum Relevance

Nepal has long struggled with a poorly articulated higher education curriculum that critics have criticized as outdated, theoretical, and lacking a proper fit with the labour market (Pandey, 2023; Regmi, 2021). Public opinion on this gap is telling: graduates have the most difficulties with immediate employability, so thousands go abroad to pursue higher studies (Khattri, 2023). Merely around 600 thousand (less than 40 percent) students in Nepal are retained by Nepali higher education institutions (KC, 2025; Rauniyar, 2025), most of whom are lured by international degrees that may open up better career prospects. Though some programs (medicine, etcetera) are appealing to both national and international students, fields such as engineering, science, humanities, management, and law are slowly losing their market share. This disparity in access highlights the structural difficulty of integrating existing curricula into the increasingly changing expectations of both Nepal's economy and the global labour market.

In this context, University Grants Commission (UGC) has undertaken Nepal Higher Education Reform Project (NEHEP) initiatives to advance local labour market driven programs (LMDPs) (UGC, 2022). Competitive grants and incentives designed to reshape curricula and incorporate employability results are among them. For instance, UGC has requested quality improvement grants and program support that would prompt universities to update their programs and implement elements with useable capabilities. But as tempting as that is to incentivize them, such initiatives are still weak. Research indicates that most university curricula are not updated timely; and when updated, they modify curricula internally not based on formal employer co-design or work-related input, with implications for a higher education curriculum that has developed little

into the work arena. Additionally, there is not sufficient career development learning (CDL) and work-integrated opportunities to close the employment gap (Khattri, 2023; Sharma, 2023).

The result of this mismatch is felt in the trend of students migrating away. A recent study shows how push factors–such as a lack of pathways, perceived lack of quality and poor signal of employability –lead to Nepali students' migration abroad and hamper the success at the home universities to retain their good staff (Pokharel et al., 2025). The Migration Atlas further illustrates the magnitude of mobility associated with education and serves to reinforce the fact that international programs provide higher-level career opportunities in this regard (Nepal Development Research Institute & AWO International, 2025). As a result, without more robust accountability mechanisms, employer collaboration and outcome-based funding opportunities, UGC's LMDP actions have a very real danger of becoming something more symbolic than transformative. Grants cannot change the outcomes, unless attached to outcomes like graduate employment ratios, satisfaction by employers and verified skills.

As such, reforms to make LMDPs truly labour-market led have to extend well beyond simply monetary incentives. Institutions need to integrate CDL into credit-bearing requirements, ensure structured internships via employer consortia, and accept modular and stackable credentials in alignment with sector skill councils (Dahal et al., 2025). Quality assurance processes need to change from input-based accreditation to outcome-based metrics (Joshi, 2018), from which curricula need to be kept fresh due to industry needs. More transparent sharing of graduate outcomes and robust cross-border educational collaborations could foster confidence in these domestic HEIs. Without such measures, Nepal's higher education system will continue to

struggle with falling enrollment in high-impact disciplines and continued outmigration of the country's highest performing students.

Although the LMDP initiative by the UGC is pushing in the right direction, without more concrete affirmations and commitments on accountabilities, employer co-ownership, and outcomes-based investment, these are merely gestures towards positive change. Pursuing such initiatives as 'embedding career development learning, expanding work-integrated learning, and reforming the accreditation' could help restore confidence in domestic programs, reduce outmigration, and align higher education with Nepal's labour market needs.

Diagnosis of Decay: Factionism and Market Failure Convergence Syndrome

The toxic interplay of deeply entrenched politicization and distorted marketization in Nepal's public higher education – most demonstrably evident at Tribhuvan University (TU) and its affiliated campuses – creates a hybrid pathology which erodes all levels of the university ecosystem, making all institutions battlegrounds of factional capture and transactional pathology, rather than crucibles of learning and innovation.

Governance: The Hollow Core

The University governance is the focal point of this crisis, as it has been purposefully unmoored in the formal collegial framework by the battle over ideological power. Vice-chancellors and senior administrators are chosen through opaque negotiations within the party headquarters, not merit-based academic search committees, making them beholden to the patronage of political parties and other student/employee unions and not accountable to an overarching academic value system (Shrestha, 2024; Karki, 2025). This results in cascading dysfunctions:

- **Strategic paralysis**: Long-term planning—ranging from modernizing curriculum, research priorities, and infrastructure—is unable to happen to accommodate unceasing short-term political calculations, under the relentless spectra of agitation, shutdowns, or no-confidence motions from other unions, as documented in TU's chronic delays to academic calendars and strategic plans.
- **Corruption and patronage:** Facilities procurement, equipment, and even simple supplies is deliberately corrupt (i.e., marked) by kickbacks, bid-rigging, or party-aligned contractors' favouritism, as are hiring and promotions, which are pursued at the behest of *bhagbanda* (party quota) systems in the public service that reward loyalty over competence, converting a veneer of market effectiveness into a rent-seeking system (Onta, 2023).
- **Loss of autonomy**: Public universities do not benefit from genuine academic freedom from state/party influence and from the financial and administrative autonomy that market-based transformation assumes; they operate subject to continued reliance (with funding micromanaged by political executives and revenues from self-financed initiatives absorbed into patronage networks (World Bank, 2020)).

Academic Culture: The Zombie Academy

This academic mission at the core of the institution has become degraded in the name of performance and ritual: the pursuit of knowledge as a way to survive, to survive and be seen as a token gesture of acceptance.

- **Curriculum-industry disconnect**: With the market's rhetoric calling for "job-ready graduates," the existing curriculum-industry disconnect is evident since it is still

marooned in outdated, theoretical content disconnected from Nepal's federal economy, digital transformation, and sustainable development goals; reform policies falter in bureaucratic committees led by risk-averse senior faculty members and disrupted by union politics (Tribhuvan University, 2025).

- **Failures of performative metrics**: Internationally, demand for research productivity leads to dysfunctional mandates (i.e., faculty must publish x papers to be promoted); but without ecosystems of support (libraries, labs, grants), outputs flood predatory journals and build up a tick-box culture by which teaching (reduced to rote lecturing) and real scholarship are devalued (Wagle, 2022).
- **Discouraged faculty:** A bifurcated faculty workforce emerges: a small elite with political patronage or lucrative consultancy gigs, and the majority of underpaid and overburdened lecturers, who may be "ghost teaching," working multiple part-time jobs, or absenteeism, corroding mentorship, the community of intellect, and professional ethics in the process (Shrestha, 2024).

The Student Experience: Consumers in a Broker Market

Under market logics, students are repositioned as "consumers" and when they receive a product which is not only worse than the raw materials it is also less accurate, they become ever more cynical.

- **Degradation of pedagogy**: Instruction remains largely lecture-like, mostly just getting through the motions through memorization; there is no emphasis on critical thinking, problem-solving, or practical competencies—leaving graduates unprepared for knowledge economies or local challenges.

- **No support services**: Counseling, career guidance, modern libraries, functional laboratories, and IT infrastructure exist only in name—chronically underfunded, dilapidated, or absent—mocking market promises such as "value-added student services" (World Bank, 2020).
- **Certification-versus-learning:** Degrees are essentially signaling certificates without labor-market value, prompting widespread perceptions of attendance as a costly formality, thus reinforcing segregation between affluent students who move to private colleges, Australian or American programs, or NOC-sponsored migration overseas, and those who live under a system which only solidifies existing injustices (Ghimire, 2023).
- **Campuses as battlegrounds:** Academic life is also constantly interrupted by politically motivated strikes, vandalism, and shutdowns; student attendance is either forced into partisan rallies or employed as foot soldiers in the “akhada power plays” at the expense of safety, time, and agency (Joshi, 2024).

Such hybrid decay—wherein factionalism hollows out governance while the market doesn’t generate the promised results—leaves public universities neither politically sovereign nor economically viable, trapped in a liminal state of dysfunction that demands comprehensive reconstruction.

Conceptualizing the Outcome: Zombie Institutions and Legitimacy Crisis

Over the past few decades, TU has fallen into the tight grip of political partisanship. Recently, the part-time lecturers associated with various political parties locked down various university offices, demanding their unconditional permanent professorship through a fast-track. It is

> common knowledge that numerous appointments in TU—especially at leadership levels—have historically been subject to political quotas and alignments. This is supported by the fact that, earlier this year, the appointment of campus chiefs at 24 constituent colleges was reportedly distributed among main political parties such as the Nepali Congress, the CPN-UML, the Loktantrik Samajbadi Party and the Maoist Centre.
>
> Similarly, the deans at various institutes and faculties were reported to be appointed on political favouritism sans meritocracy. Most importantly, the selection criteria for the appointment of the Vice Chancellor (VC), the academic and administrative head of the university, have been the individual's alignment with the ruling political party and/or coalition. Academic achievements and professional experiences seem to be secondary and additional criteria for a VC.
>
> (Joshi, 2025, para. 2-3)

The culmination of these dynamics in Nepal's public higher education is the gradual transformation of key public universities—particularly TU, but also several newer provincial institutions—into what can be termed "zombie institutions." They retain the formal structure of a university system by enrolling thousands of students, running a wide portfolio of programs, conducting examinations, and conferring degrees; but the normative heart of the university—seeking the truth, fostering critical citizenship, delivering the relevant knowledge and cultivating a merit-based academic community—has been methodically eroded by politicization, patronage and ad hoc marketisation (Joshi, 2025). Joshi (2025) has further argued that TU has become captive to partisan politics, its faculty demands and leadership appointments are decided not based on merit but according to party quotas. In another paper, he argues that they exist in bureaucratic and statistical terms, kept alive by state subsidies, regulatory

protection, and the constant stream of students who have no viable public alternatives, but they are socially and intellectually "undead," operating through ritualized routines rather than by a vibrant academic ethos (Joshi, 2024).

This zombification is closely tied to a comprehensive legitimacy crisis, which can be read through Sztompka's (1999) three bases of institutional trust—competence, integrity, and benevolence. Competence trust erodes when stakeholders observe chronic failure to deliver high-quality teaching, timely examinations, and meaningful learning outcomes: TU's low pass rates, persistent delays in academic calendars, and widespread concerns about outdated curricula and weak research capacity have made many employers skeptical of graduate capabilities, while families and communities cease to view public universities as credible problem-solvers or innovation hubs. Integrity trust is undermined by widely reported patterns of political interference, factional appointments, and perceived corruption in appointments and resource allocation, where party loyalty and union pressure often trump academic merit, reinforcing the public perception that the "market" for degrees is distorted and the "political" sphere of university governance is captured and corrupt. Benevolence trust collapses as students, faculty, and the wider public come to believe that universities serve the interests of political elites, consultancy networks, and administrative insiders more than those of learners or the broader society, especially when leadership appears more responsive to party headquarters and private intermediaries than to academic communities (Dhital, 2023).

The consequences of this multidimensional trust deficit are visible in system-wide trends: significant declines in enrollment in many public campuses and disciplines (with some exceptions in a few professional and "safe" streams), the rapid expansion of private providers

and transnational programs, and a booming overseas education industry that channels unprecedented numbers of students abroad through no-objection certificates (NOCs). These dynamics feed into an accelerating brain drain, as academically stronger students and many of the most capable faculty either exit to private institutions, international programs, or foreign labour markets, further weakening the capacity and reputation of the public system. Public discourse, including commentary by policymakers and parliamentarians, increasingly frames public universities—especially TU—as spaces of decline, politicization, and psychological distress, with some voices effectively writing them off as beyond repair. In this sense, the public university survives as an organizational shell and credentialing machine, but it becomes socially and academically moribund—a zombie institution whose continued existence does not, in its current form, translate into legitimacy, trust, or transformative educational value.

Pathways to Trust Recovery: Reclaiming the Civic University

Reversing Nepal's public higher education decline demands transcending the false dichotomy of excessive state control versus unchecked market fundamentalism. The idea then would be to envision universities as civic institutions: autonomous, yet publicly accountable, vehicles of knowledge, innovation and social progress in line with the civic university theory (Goddard & Vallance, 2013; UPP Foundation, 2019) and trust recovery as the guiding principle. This does not depend on technical solutions alone, it has to be a sustained cultural, political and organisational project that reconstitutes legitimacy in the domains of competence, integrity and benevolence (Sztompka, 1999) in light of recent reform proposals for Nepal's universities including Tribhuvan University (TU) Vision 2030, and calls for depoliticization (Tribhuvan University, 2025; Karki, 2025).

Depoliticization and Governance Reform

- **Independent, merit-based appointments:** Establish autonomous search committees composed of academics including senior lecturers, alumni and independent experts, that meet to choose vice-chancellors and deans and campus chiefs based on actual academic leadership, management experience, and research record. Such provisions could be cushioned via legislative mechanisms – fixed terms, criteria to enforce, prohibitions against running on party lines – as in recent analyses that called for the termination of automatic chancellorship and "*bhagbanda*" (referred to as party quota) by the Prime Minister.
- **Increasing collegial mechanisms:** Reinforce the binding authority of faculty senates, academic councils and departmental boards of higher education (e.g., on approval of curriculum, allocation for research, accreditation of the program and junior assignments) and reduce the discretionary powers of politically appointed executives and in doing so, become one form of evidence for TU's own reorganization vision of autonomous schools and campuses.
- **Reforming Unions:** Legislate the delinking of all student and teacher unions from national political parties and institutionalize them as professional associations focused on educational well-being, pedagogical innovation and institutional advocacy. This might mean establishing criteria for qualifications preventing leadership from non-partisan students/faculty and funding contingent upon academic support for the university, not political work in other words.

Cultivating Authentic Academic Vitality

Developing Genuine Academic Vitality

- **Critical citizenship curriculum:** Reposition from rote, knowledge-driven programs to participatory, research-driven curricula rooted in critical thinking, ethical reasoning, the ability to critically think across disciplines, and a call for civic engagement in response to development in Nepal (e.g., federalism, climate resilience, digital equity). Consistently reconsider with faculty, students, alumni, employers, and communities, as per TU reform agendas as well as wider calls for market-driven but also socially connected education.
- **Establishing a research community:** Move 10–20 percent of recurring funds to modern libraries, and to modern digital repositories, and to competitive internal grants with transparent peer review, that can provide a better ecosystem of support for researchers. Focus on quality measures (e.g., contribution, societal effects) as opposed to quantity, create cooperation with international partners and tackle Nepal's low research production. This way, build a solid foundation for a robust research ecosystem.
- **Revitalize pedagogy:** Establish obligatory academies for faculty development on student centred practices (e.g., active learning, flipped classrooms, project-based assessment), with promoting teacherships, receiving awards, and reduction in administrative burden for excellence in teaching. Test them on flagship campuses before scaling.

Promoting Community-Led Scholarship in Action

This pillar represents the basis towards trust recovery, re-centring universities to be recognized as institutions of strength and contributing to regional and national success on the ground (UPP Foundation, 2019).

- **Service-learning and community building projects**: Integrate mandatory credit-based service-learning modules in which students are asked to apply disciplinary research work to practical problems (e.g., public health campaigns in rural districts, engineering interventions for disaster resilience, teacher training for provincial schools), building the trustworthiness of competence through evidence of impact.
- **University as public forum**: Turn universities into public places of community dialogue — from a lecture or policy debate to a cultural festival and town hall — and transform them into places where ideas about who is right (e.g., federal governance, youth employment) become perceived as neutral conveners and act as good citizens.
- **Fair partnerships**: Build multi-stakeholder partnerships between local governments, industry, other NGOs and cooperatives to conduct applied research, internships and professional development (e.g., vocational upskilling for SMEs), ensuring universities generate concrete social and economic impact and autonomy with regards to universities.

Ensuring Transparency and Integrity of Leadership

- **Radical** transparency: Mandate real-time online sharing of budgets, procurement bids, appointment shortlists, examination results and performance dashboards, complemented by independent ombudspersons and annual public audits to reestablish the trust in integrity.
- **Ethical** codes and enforcement: Create enforceable codes of conduct against political interference, nepotism and conflicts of interest; adjudicate ethics committees including public opinion, including oversight from external members quickly and impartially; with whistleblower protections and training.

These pathways - if sequenced (governance first, then vitality and engagement) - offer Nepal's public universities a roadmap for transforming from zombie to trustworthy civic anchors, an approach as a result of gradual but successful examples in peer contexts such as Rwanda and Ethiopia (Karki, 2025).

Conclusion

Nepal's public higher education system is caught in a debilitating trap. The political akhada has made universities battlegrounds for partisan warfare, and misguided market reforms have supplied a veneer of modernity devoid of quality, autonomy or accountability. This hybrid is the birth of zombie institutions — the ceremonial conferors of degrees while intellectually and morally bankrupt. The net cost is measured not only on inadequate infrastructure or outdated syllabi, but also on an astonishing loss of public trust — the very social capital a public institution needs in order to function.

Recovery is daunting; it is neither impossible nor easy. It takes a radical departure from the existing approach. The answer is not to choose between state and market, but to restore the university's civic mission. And it means a meaningful, brave project of depoliticization, an honest and engaged academic culture, and an unflinching commitment to transparency and service to the community. It requires leadership from within the academic community, pressure from an educated public, and political consent that views a revived public university not as a source of patronage, but as the foundation of a democratic, equitable, and innovative Nepal. The task is to dismantle the *akhada*, transcend the failed market mimicry, and rebuild institutions that earn trust by visibly serving the public good. The alternative is continued decay, and the permanent loss of a generation's potential.

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