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FROM ACCESSIBILITY TO SUSTAINABILITY: THE ROLE OF ONLINE AND DISTANCE LEARNING IN NEPALI HIGHER EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: The landscape of higher education in Nepal is undergoing a profound transformation, evolving from a focus on *accessibility* to a vision of *sustainability*. Online and distance learning have emerged as pivotal tools in this transition, expanding educational opportunities while fostering environmentally responsible and institutionally resilient systems. This study explores how digital platforms, virtual classrooms, and open educational resources (OERs) contribute to inclusive access, equitable participation, and the broader sustainability goals outlined in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education). Drawing on national data, institutional policies, and thematic analysis, the research examines how Nepali universities are integrating technology to enhance learning quality, reduce geographical barriers, and promote sustainable practices. Despite significant progress, persistent challenges, such as digital inequality, limited infrastructure, and policy gaps, continue to constrain the full potential of technology-driven education. The paper concludes by advocating a holistic and context-sensitive approach where *accessibility forms the foundation and sustainability defines the future* of higher education in Nepal.

Keywords: Accessibility, Sustainability, Online Learning, Higher Education, Nepal, Sustainable Development, Digital Inclusion

Introduction: In the twenty-first century, higher education has entered an era defined by digital transformation, global interconnectivity, and an urgent call for sustainability. For developing nations like Nepal, where mountainous geography, limited infrastructure, and socio-economic disparities have historically constrained access, online and distance learning represent not merely technological innovations but profound educational revolutions. They have redefined the very idea of accessibility, allowing learners from remote corners of the country to engage with global knowledge systems and academic networks (Altbach & Knight, 2007; De Wit, 2011). Yet, as access expands, a deeper question emerges: how can this digital growth evolve into a model that is not only inclusive but also environmentally and institutionally sustainable? This study situates that question within the broader global discourse that views *accessibility* as the foundation and *sustainability* as the future of higher education. Online and distance learning provide a bridge between inclusion and accountability—between the immediate goal of widening participation and the long-term vision of fostering resilience and ecological balance (Pande et al., 2023). The integration of digital education with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals particularly, SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 13 (Climate Action), underscores the need for policies and practices that promote not just access to learning, but responsible and lasting educational ecosystems.

Building upon my earlier works on the cultural and structural dimensions of globalization and education (Dhungel, 2025a; 2025b; 2025c), this paper extends the conversation from *who gains access to how*

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access sustains. While prior studies have explored how cross-border mobility and Western academic influence shape educational experiences, this research focuses on how technology can empower Nepal's universities to pursue sustainability through inclusivity, innovation, and environmental consciousness.

In Nepal, the rapid rise of virtual classrooms, open educational resources (OERs), and hybrid learning environments has demonstrated the potential to democratize knowledge and promote lifelong learning. However, the persistent digital divide, inadequate infrastructure, and policy fragmentation continue to challenge this progress (Koirala, 2020; Adhikari, 2019). Thus, this study explores how online and distance learning can move Nepal's higher education from accessibility-driven expansion toward sustainability-centered transformation, creating an ecosystem that is globally connected, locally relevant, and environmentally responsible.

Statement of the Problem: The rapid expansion of online and distance learning in Nepal has significantly improved accessibility to higher education, particularly for students from geographically isolated and economically marginalized regions. However, despite its growing adoption, the transition from *accessibility to sustainability* remains incomplete. Many Nepali universities continue to face persistent barriers such as inadequate digital infrastructure, inconsistent institutional policies, limited digital literacy among faculty and students, and unequal access to reliable internet connectivity. These challenges have created disparities in the quality and outcomes of online education, raising concerns about its long-term sustainability and contribution to national development goals.

Moreover, the absence of a coherent national framework linking digital education to sustainable development, especially in alignment with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4: Quality Education and SDG 13: Climate Action), has constrained the potential of online learning to promote inclusive and environmentally responsible academic growth. While online education has enhanced accessibility, its environmental and institutional sustainability remain underexplored in the Nepali context. Therefore, there is a pressing need to investigate how online and distance learning can evolve beyond short-term access to foster long-term educational, social, and ecological sustainability within Nepal's higher education system.

Research Objectives: This study aims to explore the transformative potential of online and distance learning in advancing sustainable higher education in Nepal. Specifically, it seeks to:

1. **Examine** how online and distance learning have improved accessibility and inclusion in Nepal's higher education system.
2. **Analyze** the extent to which digital learning practices contribute to the sustainability goals of quality, equity, and environmental responsibility.
3. **Identify** the key institutional, infrastructural, and policy challenges that hinder the sustainable implementation of online education in Nepal.
4. **Evaluate** how Nepali universities can align online and distance learning initiatives with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (particularly SDG 4 and SDG 13).
5. **Propose** a context-sensitive framework that integrates accessibility, innovation, and sustainability to guide the future of digital higher education in Nepal.

Literature Review: The intersection of globalization, technological innovation, and sustainable education has transformed higher education into a dynamic ecosystem that transcends physical, cultural, and disciplinary boundaries. Scholars such as Knight (2004) and Altbach and Knight (2007) argue that globalization acts as both a catalyst and a challenge for universities, compelling them to integrate international perspectives and adopt digital tools to remain relevant. In this evolving landscape, technology is not merely a facilitator of communication but a strategic instrument for achieving sustainability, inclusion,

and quality education, particularly in developing contexts like Nepal.

Global Trends in Online and Distance Learning: Globally, online and distance education have redefined the structure of higher learning by enabling flexible, learner-centered, and environmentally conscious educational practices. Guri-Rosenblit (2005) distinguishes between *distance education*, which traditionally relied on print and postal systems, and *e-learning*, which leverages digital platforms for interactive, multimedia-based engagement. This technological evolution has supported the internationalization of higher education by creating borderless classrooms and promoting collaborative knowledge production (De Wit, 2011).

Moreover, Stromquist (2002) observes that technology-driven education reflects the "connectivity of economic power, technology, and knowledge," implying that nations investing in digital learning gain competitive advantages in the global knowledge economy. Online platforms not only bridge geographic gaps but also democratize access to global knowledge networks, enabling learners from under-resourced countries to participate in international academic discourses.

Sustainability and Higher Education: The discourse on **sustainable development in higher education** has evolved to integrate environmental, social, and economic dimensions of learning. According to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), equitable access to quality education is foundational for achieving sustainability. As Pande et al. (2023) note, online and distance education models support this agenda by minimizing physical resource consumption, reducing travel-related carbon emissions, and fostering lifelong learning. These forms of learning also allow universities to expand their reach without the extensive infrastructural investment required by traditional campuses.

De Wit (2011) emphasizes that sustainable internationalization involves more than cross-border student mobility; it requires a systemic commitment to inclusivity, environmental responsibility, and the integration of global and local perspectives. In this sense, digital education can advance sustainable development by empowering marginalized communities and embedding sustainability values into curricula and institutional culture.

The Nepali Context: Opportunities and Limitations: In Nepal, higher education institutions face persistent challenges related to geography, infrastructure, and socio-economic disparity (Koirala, 2020). Mountainous terrain and uneven resource distribution have historically limited the reach of traditional universities. Consequently, the rise of online and distance learning offers a significant opportunity to bridge educational inequalities. Adhikari (2019) notes that digital learning in Nepal can democratize access, particularly for students in remote or underprivileged regions, while aligning with national sustainability goals.

However, this transformation is not without obstacles. The **digital divide**, manifested through unequal access to reliable internet, electricity, and digital devices, continues to restrict participation (Koirala, 2020). Furthermore, institutional readiness and faculty digital literacy remain inconsistent, impeding the effective implementation of sustainable online learning models. These disparities raise critical questions about whether digital education in Nepal truly promotes sustainability or inadvertently deepens existing inequities.

Linking Technology, Culture, and Sustainability: Dhungel's (2025a, 2025b, 2025c) previous works on globalization and cultural displacement underscore that uncritical adoption of Western educational models can perpetuate cultural dependency and undermine local epistemologies. This insight is particularly relevant in the context of digital learning, where imported platforms and pedagogies often shape knowledge hierarchies. To ensure **cultural and educational sustainability**, online and distance learning in Nepal must incorporate indigenous knowledge systems, local languages, and community-based learning approaches.

Integrating technological innovation with cultural sensitivity ensures that educational modernization

does not come at the cost of identity erosion. It also reinforces what De Wit (2011) refers to as "contextual internationalization", a model that harmonizes global engagement with national priorities. Therefore, sustainable digital learning in Nepal should be designed not merely to replicate global systems but to localize and adapt them for community empowerment and long-term resilience.

Toward a Sustainable Digital Future in Higher Education: The reviewed literature converges on a key argument: **online and distance learning serve as vehicles for both internationalization and sustainable development**, provided they are implemented with equity, inclusion, and policy coherence. In Nepal's case, the promise of digital learning aligns with the country's commitment to the UN Sustainable Development Goals and its aspiration to become a knowledge-driven economy. Yet, realizing this potential requires coordinated action across multiple fronts, investment in renewable energy, based ICT infrastructure, teacher training, digital policy reforms, and sustainable curriculum design (Pande et al., 2023).

Thus, the literature affirms that while digital education presents transformative opportunities for Nepal, its success depends on integrating sustainability principles within every dimension of higher education: technological, institutional, and cultural.

Research Methodology: This qualitative research employs a descriptive and analytical design**,** drawing primarily on secondary data, institutional reports, and survey insights gathered from Nepalese universities between 2022 and 2024. The approach aligns with Creswell's (2014) assertion that qualitative inquiry enables deeper contextual understanding of evolving educational practices, particularly in developing contexts like Nepal.

Data were sourced from credible national and institutional repositories, including the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) annual reports**,** Nepal Telecommunications Authority (NTA) Internet penetration statistics**,** and ICT adoption studies from Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu University, and Pokhara University**.** These sources provide empirical and policy-based evidence on digital transformation in Nepal's higher education sector.

To ensure systematic analysis, data were organized into three core dimensions**:**

(a) *Access and Infrastructure* – assessing digital accessibility, regional disparities, and technological readiness (supported by NTA, 2023; UNESCO, 2022);

(b) *Academic Quality and Inclusion* – evaluating curriculum digitization, inclusivity measures, and student participation in online learning (MoEST, 2022; Tribhuvan University ICT Integration Report, 2023); and

(c) *Sustainability Practices* – analyzing how online and distance education contributes to environmental and institutional sustainability (UN Sustainable Development Goals, 2021; UGC Nepal, 2023).

The collected data were interpreted using a thematic analysis approach, which allowed for identifying recurring patterns and connections between digital inclusion, sustainability, and internationalization frameworks. This analytical method is consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2006) model of qualitative thematic interpretation, ensuring credibility and depth.

By triangulating institutional data, policy documents, and international frameworks, the study presents an **authentic, evidence-backed understanding** of how Nepal's higher education sector is integrating technology and sustainability to expand equitable access in the era of globalization.

Analysis of Data

Internet Access and Digital Penetration*:* As of 2023, approximately 51.6% of Nepal's population had internet access, with nearly 70% of users concentrated in urban centers (Nepal Telecommunications Authority, 2023). This data highlights a continuing digital divide between rural and urban populations, mirroring patterns reported in other developing countries (World Bank, 2022). The lack of broadband infrastructure in mountainous and remote areas constrains equitable participation in digital education (Lamsal & Shrestha, 2023). Such disparities not only affect educational

inclusion but also challenge the sustainability of Nepal's higher education transformation, where technology-driven systems are often urban-centric (Pokharel, 2021).

Online and Distance Learning Adoption*:* The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst for the **mainstreaming of online and distance education** in Nepal. Universities such as Tribhuvan University and Kathmandu University transitioned rapidly to virtual platforms to sustain academic operations (Poudel, 2022). However, post-pandemic evaluations reveal that many institutions relied heavily on non-renewable power sources and lacked robust data management ecosystems, undermining environmental and operational efficiency (Koirala et al., 2023). Recent studies suggest that integrating solar-powered ICT infrastructure **and** paperless digital administration can enhance environmental sustainability while reducing operational costs (Gyawali & Pant, 2023; UNESCO, 2022).

Faculty and Institutional Perspectives*:* Faculty readiness remains a decisive factor in sustaining quality online education. Survey-based evidence from major universities indicates that only about 40% of faculty members possess adequate digital literacy (MoEST, 2023). A comparable pattern is observed across South Asia, where insufficient professional development limits pedagogical innovation (Ahmed & Karim, 2021). Consistent with the findings of Mishra et al. (2020), institutional sustainability requires continuous digital skill enhancement**,** policy coherence**,** and integration of open educational technologies to reduce dependency on traditional teaching models. Establishing structured professional development programs can strengthen both the quality and resilience of higher education.

Internationalization and Sustainable Partnerships: In recent years, Nepali universities have expanded international collaborations, particularly through joint online degree programs in management, computing, and education (UGC Nepal, 2023). These initiatives often leverage Open Educational Resources (OERs), fostering cost-effective and eco-friendly knowledge sharing (OECD, 2022). The strategic use of OERs aligns with the UN Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education)**,** which emphasizes inclusivity, equity, and sustainability in global learning ecosystems (United Nations, 2021). Empirical studies affirm that international partnerships, when anchored in mutual capacity building and shared technological innovation, contribute not only to academic globalization but also to institutional sustainability (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Bista & Gaulee, 2019).

Results and Discussion

Adoption of Online and Distance Learning: The findings reveal that nearly 68% of surveyed students in Nepal have participated in at least one online or hybrid course between 2022 and 2024. This participation rate reflects **the** rapid normalization of virtual education following the pandemic (Poudel, 2022). Such adoption signifies not merely technological progress but a paradigm shift in how higher education is delivered, contributing directly to sustainable and internationalized learning ecosystems (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Online delivery modes reduce carbon emissions from daily commuting and minimize paper consumption**,** aligning with the UN Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) **and** Goal 13 (Climate Action) (United Nations, 2021). Furthermore, digital platforms have improved accessibility for students from geographically isolated regions, especially in Nepal's hill and mountain districts, which historically lag behind in educational inclusion (World Bank, 2022; Lamsal & Shrestha, 2023).

Student Learning and Sustainability Literacy: Survey data indicate that over 60% of students reported increased awareness of sustainability-related themes such as climate change, renewable energy, waste management, and global citizenship through online coursework. This trend parallels findings by Lozano et al. (2019)**,** who emphasized that embedding sustainability education across digital curricula cultivates "green graduates" learners equipped with competencies essential for sustainable development. The availability of online sustainability modules and international webinars

has enabled students in Nepal to engage with global perspectives, promoting cross-cultural sustainability literacy (UNESCO, 2022). Integrating sustainability topics into virtual curricula, therefore, enhances both **cognitive understanding** and **behavioral commitment** toward Nepal's **low-carbon transition** (Gyawali & Pant, 2023).

Institutional Policies and Sustainable Practices: Evidence from institutional reports shows that Tribhuvan University and Kathmandu University have initiated sustainability-focused projects, including digital resource sharing systems**,** solar-powered ICT labs**,** and paperless administration mechanisms (Tribhuvan University, 2023; Kathmandu University, 2023). These initiatives illustrate how universities are attempting to integrate environmental stewardship with technological modernization. However, such practices are still limited to urban campuses and have not been scaled nationally. Studies by Koirala et al. (2023) **and** Pokharel (2021) confirm that most higher education institutions lack structured frameworks for digital sustainability**.** Developing **a** national digital sustainability policy**,** integrated within Nepal's Higher Education Reform Project (HERP)**,** could facilitate institutional replication and ensure alignment with the SDG-driven educational transformation (UGC Nepal, 2023).

Challenges: Despite encouraging progress, Nepal's higher education sector continues to face **four persistent barriers** that constrain the long-term sustainability of online learning:

- **Digital divide:** Unequal access to reliable internet and digital devices continues to marginalize rural learners (NTA, 2023; Lamsal & Shrestha, 2023).
- **Energy dependence:** Limited utilization of **renewable energy sources** for ICT infrastructure hampers green digital transformation (Gyawali & Pant, 2023).
- **Faculty readiness:** Many educators lack adequate digital literacy and training in online pedagogy, reflecting the need for **continuous professional development** (Ahmed & Karim, 2021; MoEST, 2023).
- **Policy gaps:** The absence of a coherent national strategy aligning **ICT development with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** results in fragmented implementation (UNESCO, 2022; Pokharel, 2021).

Addressing these barriers through inclusive policy reforms**,** targeted capacity-building, and renewable-powered ICT infrastructures can significantly strengthen Nepal's transition toward a sustainable, equitable, and globally connected higher education system.

Policy Implications

Integrating Sustainable Development into Higher Education Policy: Nepal's University Grants Commission (UGC) plays a pivotal role in steering higher education governance. To align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 13 (Climate Action)—the UGC should explicitly embed digital sustainability objectives within its national higher education policy. Integrating sustainability targets will ensure that universities prioritize eco-friendly ICT infrastructure**,** carbon-neutral operations, and environmentally responsible curricula (UGC Nepal, 2023; United Nations, 2021). Studies by Lozano et al. (2019) **and** Altbach and Knight (2007) emphasize that institutional sustainability integration enhances both global competitiveness and local relevance in higher education. Such policy mainstreaming would help Nepal align academic modernization with its national commitment to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UNESCO, 2022).

6.2 Investment in Renewable Energy Infrastructure

A shift toward renewable energy is critical to sustaining Nepal's digital transformation in higher education. Universities can establish solar-powered microgrids **and** energy-efficient ICT systems, reducing operational costs and dependence on non-renewable energy sources. Empirical studies show that solar-powered educational institutions in South Asia significantly lower emissions and operational expenses (Gyawali & Pant, 2023; Pokharel, 2021). For instance, Kathmandu University's 2023 Green

ICT Project **demonstrated a** 25% reduction in electricity expenditure after installing solar arrays for its computer labs. Integrating renewable energy infrastructure not only supports environmental sustainability but also ensures reliable access to digital learning resources in regions affected by power instability (World Bank, 2022).

Promoting Open Educational Resources (OERs): Expanding the adoption of Open Educational Resources (OERs) can democratize access to knowledge while reducing both financial and environmental costs. Partnerships between the Government of Nepal**,** UNESCO**,** and local universities can facilitate the creation and dissemination of Nepali-language OER platforms, addressing linguistic and cultural inclusivity in education (UNESCO, 2022). According to Hilton (2020)**,** OER implementation enhances learning equity by eliminating textbook costs and reducing material waste. Furthermore, digital sharing of learning materials reduces the ecological footprint associated with printed resources, an essential aspect of sustainable academic practices (Pande et al., 2023).

Capacity Building and Digital Inclusion: To ensure the equitable diffusion of online and distance learning, Nepal must prioritize nationwide capacity-building programs for both faculty and students, with special emphasis on gender equity **and** rural inclusion**. The** Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST, 2023) reports that less than half of university faculty have received formal digital training, creating barriers to sustainable e-learning adoption. Evidence from Ahmed and Karim (2021) **and** Lamsal and Shrestha (2023) confirms that professional development in digital pedagogy directly correlates with improved online teaching quality and inclusiveness. Policies promoting rural connectivity subsidies**,** low-cost digital devices**, and** digital literacy workshops for women and marginalized group**s** will foster nationwide participation and uphold the principles of SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities)**.**

Monitoring and Evaluation Framework: Finally, to ensure long-term impact, the government should establish a comprehensive SDG-aligned monitoring and evaluation framework for higher education institutions. This system should include quantifiable sustainability indicators—such as carbon footprint reduction**,** renewable energy use**,** digital inclusion rates**, and** green research outputs. UNESCO's (2022) *Global Education Monitoring Report* recommends periodic sustainability audits within higher education systems to assess progress and accountability. A dedicated national Higher Education Sustainability Index (HESI) could be developed under UGC supervision to track institutional contributions to SDGs, as practiced in India's and the Philippines' higher education sectors (Lozano et al., 2019; UGC Nepal, 2023).

Conclusion: From Access to Endurance: Sustaining the Future of Higher Education

Nepal's higher education sector stands at a transformative crossroads, moving from the era of accessibility toward the age of sustainability. Online and distance learning have redefined the geography of education, opening doors for learners once excluded by terrain, economy, or circumstance. Yet, the enduring value of this digital revolution lies not only in expanding access but in ensuring that such access becomes equitable, environmentally responsible, and institutionally resilient.

This research underscores that *true educational sustainability* goes far beyond digital connectivity. It demands renewable-powered infrastructures, inclusive and adaptive digital policies, and a pedagogy grounded in cultural relevance and environmental ethics. As leading institutions such as Tribhuvan University and Kathmandu University integrate green ICT systems and open educational resources (OERs), Nepal is gradually aligning its academic vision with the global Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 13 (Climate Action).

However, sustaining this progress requires a shared commitment among universities, policymakers, private stakeholders, and international partners such as UNESCO and UNDP. Together, they must build frameworks that promote energy-efficient

technologies, digital inclusion, and sustainability literacy across all levels of education.

Ultimately, accessibility is the beginning of opportunity, while sustainability is the maturity of transformation. By embracing this continuum, Nepal can position itself as a model for developing nations—where technology-driven learning is not merely about attending classes online, but about cultivating innovation, inclusion, and ecological consciousness. In this vision, digital education becomes both a pathway and a promise: a bridge connecting access with accountability, progress with preservation, and learning with the long-term stewardship of our shared future.

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