









“Bridging the gap: How career development learning mediates higher education and employability outcomes in Nepal”

AUTHORS	Rewan Kumar Dahal   Binod Ghimire  Dilli Raj Sharma  Dipendra Karki   Surendra Prasad Joshi 
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Rewan Kumar Dahal, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Faculty of Management, Nepal Commerce Campus, Tribhuvan University, Nepal.

Binod Ghimire, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Faculty of Management, Nepal Commerce Campus, Tribhuvan University, Nepal. (Corresponding author)

Dilli Raj Sharma, Ph.D., Professor, Central Department of Management, Faculty of Management, Tribhuvan University, Nepal.

Dipendra Karki, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Faculty of Management, Nepal Commerce Campus, Tribhuvan University, Nepal.

Surendra Prasad Joshi, MBS, Faculty Member, Faculty of Management, Thames International College, Tribhuvan University, Nepal.



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Rewan Kumar Dahal (Nepal), Binod Ghimire (Nepal), Dilli Raj Sharma (Nepal), Dipendra Karki (Nepal), Surendra Prasad Joshi (Nepal)

BRIDGING THE GAP: HOW CAREER DEVELOPMENT LEARNING MEDIATES HIGHER EDUCATION AND EMPLOYABILITY OUTCOMES IN NEPAL

Abstract

Higher education institutions are vital for preparing future professionals and integrating education with the job market. Nevertheless, the limited opportunities for career-orientated education in Nepal continue to pose a significant challenge to the employability of youths. This study examines the impact of the higher education institutional environment and career development learnings on the employability of Nepalese youth. It also examines how career development learning influences the connection between the higher education environment and employment preparedness. The study employs a descriptive and causal methodology, using data from a survey of 411 respondents aged 21–35 actively pursuing work and engaging in career-preparatory courses in Nepal. It employed structural equation modeling to analyze the data and assess the proposed hypotheses. The results suggest that the higher education institution environment does not significantly improve employability ($\beta = 0.038, p > 0.05$). Career development learning influences this association ($\beta = 0.803, p < 0.05$), underscoring its essential function in converting educational experiences into competencies and preparedness for the job market. The paper stresses the importance of self-determination theory, illustrating how autonomy, competence, and interpersonal interactions contribute to personal development and motivation. Despite the specific cultural and economic context, the outcomes highlight the importance of higher education institutions in fostering career-oriented learning opportunities, advancing employability, and promoting broader developmental goals.

Keywords career, education, employment, skills, learning, youth

JEL Classification I23, I26, J24

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are essential for providing individuals with the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in an increasingly competitive job market. The institutions play a critical role in the nation's development by bridging academic learning and workforce readiness. Nevertheless, youth employability remains a substantial obstacle in numerous low- and middle-income countries, such as Nepal. Limited career preparation resources, socioeconomic constraints, and a lack of structured support systems within higher education institutions frequently impede the transition from university to the workforce. These barriers exacerbate skill deficits and limit career opportunities, leaving many graduates unprepared for the intricacies of the contemporary job market.

Despite increasing interest in this field, existing research on employability frequently prioritizes short-term job preparedness over a more comprehensive perspective incorporating career development as a

learning process. Career development learning (CDL) provides an optimistic framework for addressing these gaps by cultivating critical skills, including self-efficacy, adaptability, and decision-making. However, there has been a lack of thorough investigation into incorporating CDL into employability frameworks, especially in the context of higher education institutions in developing countries.

This study addresses the scientific issue of how HEIs effectively utilize CDL to bridge the divide between academic experiences and employability outcomes. Examining the mediating function of CDL provides valuable insights into how higher education institutions can establish environments that promote career readiness and long-term professional success, thereby contributing to both individual growth and broader socioeconomic development.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between employability and higher education institutions (HEIs) is crucial in academic and policy discussions, especially in light of swiftly evolving labor markets. Higher education institutions have transitioned from their conventional function as knowledge producers to becoming essential facilitators of personal and professional development. Their role encompasses equipping students with the abilities, skills, and experiences necessary for joining and thriving in the workforce. Employability, defined as the capacity to obtain, sustain, and advance in significant employment, is affected by various aspects, including self-efficacy, adaptability, social support, and goal-setting (Lent, 2021; Wang & Qu, 2022). These traits are developed through organized educational experiences, establishing higher education institutions as essential contributors to workforce development.

Various theoretical frameworks offer valuable insights into how higher education institutions promote employability. Self-determination theory (SDT) emphasizes the psychological necessities of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which are essential for intrinsic motivation and overall well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Within the context of employability, these psychological demands cultivate cognitive resilience, accountability, and self-regulation, which are essential throughout job searches and career changes (Gross, 1998; Taylor et al., 2017). Higher education institutions can utilize self-determination theory by establishing learning environments that foster intrinsic motivation, empowering students to assume responsibility for their career growth. Social cognitive career theory (SCCT), based on Bandura's (1986)

social cognitive framework, recognizes self-efficacy, result expectations, and goal setting as fundamental factors influencing career-related behaviors. SCCT emphasizes that self-efficacy and well-defined career goals enable students to manage intricate decision-making scenarios (Lent, 2021). Higher education institutions significantly enhance these elements through focused career development initiatives, mentoring programs, and experiential learning opportunities.

Career construction theory (CCT) emphasizes adaptability as a fundamental aspect of employability, especially in maneuvering through contemporary, volatile labor markets (Savickas, 2021; Monteiro et al., 2022). CCT underscores the significance of career readiness, continuous education, and proactive career administration. These concepts correspond with frameworks such as the DOTS model, which emphasizes choice learning, opportunity awareness, transition learning, and self-awareness. The DOTS model sees career development learning (CDL) as a complete way to teach technical skills, adaptability, resilience, and a growth mindset that lasts a lifetime (Watts, 2006; McCash et al., 2021). Empirical research highlights the complex aspects of employability. Research in technology-driven environments indicates that proactive learning and self-regulation enhance employability outcomes (González-Navarro et al., 2019; Affum-Osei et al., 2023). Attitudes from early career experiences and the presence of social support substantially impact job readiness, as emphasized by Mattila et al. (2018) and Hammond et al. (2017). Customized employability programs that cater to individual requirements, especially for at-risk populations, have demonstrated efficacy in enhancing work readiness. Moreover, graduates entering the labor market amid economic

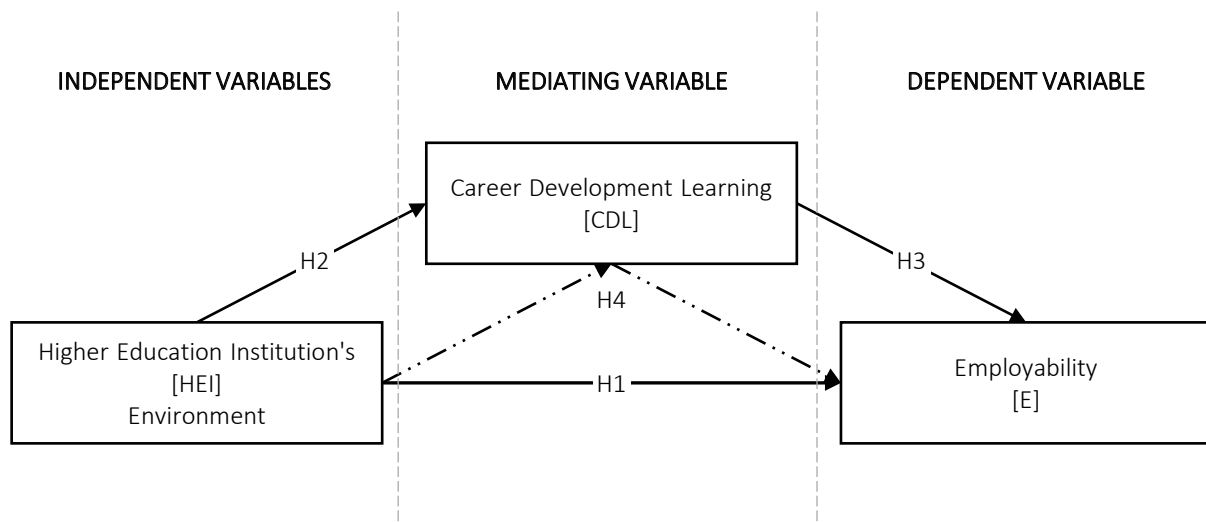


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

recessions encounter intensified difficulties, such as elevated psychological stress and diminished social functioning, underscoring the necessity of transformative employability education (Li & Toll, 2021; Healy, 2023).

The increasing dependence on digital platforms has transformed employability development. Advanced digital tools and platforms enable adaptive learning, foster self-directed development, and improve students' ability to navigate modern labor markets (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2014; Shiohira, 2021). Nonetheless, these digital settings pose problems, especially for pupils who lack digital literacy or access to essential technology tools. This paradox underscores the need for higher education institutions to incorporate innovative, technology-based solutions into their courses while ensuring equity in access and opportunity. By integrating career development learning into their academic curricula, higher education institutions distinctly equip themselves to tackle the intricacies of employability. Recent studies have highlighted the dual function of higher education institutions in equipping students with global career prospects while concurrently supporting local economic development (Elumalai et al., 2021; Žalėnienė & Pereira, 2021). This dual obligation necessitates a careful equilibrium between fulfilling the practical requirements of the labor market and upholding academic rigor (Biancardi et al., 2023). Higher educational institutions can effectively bridge this gap by implementing comprehensive, learner-centered solutions incorporating career learning theo-

ries and fostering lifelong learning. These tactics enhance work preparedness and provide students with the agility and resilience necessary to succeed in quickly changing employment environments (Dahal, 2018; Spurk, 2021).

The research underscores the crucial role of higher education institutions in improving employability through organized learning environments and theoretical frameworks such as self-determination theory, social cognitive career theory, and career construction theory. These ideas offer a comprehensive understanding of the roles of intrinsic drive, adaptability, and lifelong learning in fostering job preparation. Furthermore, CDL is an essential intermediary in connecting HEI environments and employment results.

This study addresses how HEIs effectively utilize CDL to bridge the divide between academic experiences and employability outcomes. Examining the mediating function of CDL provides valuable insights into how higher education institutions can establish environments that promote career readiness and long-term professional success, thereby contributing to both individual growth and broader socioeconomic development.

This study presents a conceptual framework (Figure 1) that synthesizes self-determination theory, social cognitive career theory, and career construction theory to investigate how higher education institutions might improve employability by adopting career development learning frame-

works, thus equipping graduates for success in a complex and dynamic labor market.

The study has four hypotheses based on the conceptual framework.

H1: Employability has a positive and significant association with the HEI environment.

H2: The HEI environment significantly and positively influences career development learning.

H3: Participation in career development learning significantly improves employability.

H4: The career development learning mediates the relationship between the HEI environment and employability.

2. METHODS

The study employed a positivist paradigm to examine the impact of the higher education institution (HEI) environment and career development learning (CDL) on youth employability in Nepal. It used a mixed-method approach, combining descriptive and causal approaches. The descriptive approach was employed to delineate the principal characteristics of the population, while a causal research design investigated the correlations and causal connections among variables. The paper concentrated on young adults aged 21 to 35 in Nepal actively pursuing work prospects.

2.1. Data collection procedure

The study obtained primary data through a structured survey using a standardized questionnaire. The poll focused on individuals living in major cities of Nepal actively seeking employment prospects and engaging in preparatory courses to enhance their competitiveness in the job market. Participants were approached using a combination of convenience sampling and selective sample methods. The poll was conducted from January to April 2024, and 800 questionnaires were distributed to 20 colleges offering job preparation courses. An average of 40 surveys were sent to each institution, along with explicit instructions for their completion. A total of 453 questionnaires were collected, of

which 411 were considered valid and suitable for data analysis, yielding a response rate of 51.14%. Table 1 encapsulates the demographic attributes of 411 respondents.

Table 1. Respondent characteristics

Attributes	Values	Respondents	
		Number	%
Age (in years)	≤ 20	202	49.2
	21 ≤ to ≤ 25	150	36.5
	26 ≤ to ≤ 30	54	13.1
	31 ≤ to ≤ 35	5	1.2
Gender	Male	126	30.7
	Female	285	69.3
Marital status	Unmarried	402	97.8
	Married	9	2.2
Educational status	Undergraduates	291	70.8
	Graduates	115	28.0
	Others	5	1.2
Job experience (in years)	≤ 1	255	62.1
	1 ≤ to ≤ 2	114	27.7
	2 ≤ to ≤ 3	28	6.8
	3 ≤	14	3.4
Total		411	100.0

A five-point Likert-type scale was used to assess the study's self-development constructs. The questionnaires were prepared in English and Nepalese to enhance respondents' comprehension and response rate. The questionnaire had 14 elements for evaluating the HEI environment and 12 for analyzing CDL. Additionally, the dimensions of employability were assessed using six items. Thus, the final questionnaire included 32 items relevant to the study variables, as revealed in Table 2.

Common method bias (CMB) can happen when data are collected simultaneously, and self-reported information is used often (Jones-Burton, 2009). CMB makes the relationships between the variables being studied less intense. Podsakoff et al. (2003) suggested the Harman single-factor test, which the study assessed to determine the existence and magnitude of the CMB. CMB is applied if the Harman single factor can explain less than 50% of the variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The variance of the 32-item dataset was 48.956%, significantly less than the 50% threshold. Therefore, the analysis showed no indication of any confounding effects caused by the CMB.

Table 2. Survey instrument items

	Statements	Notation
HEI Environment		
1.	The university offers students various pertinent and varied internship opportunities	Opportunities
2.	The internship opportunities provided by the university substantially contribute to developing practical skills	Skillfulness
3.	The university facilitates student access to internship opportunities through effective communication and support	Communication
4.	The practical settings of apprenticeships perfectly align with the competencies imparted in academic curricula	Alignment
5.	The university broadens my comprehension of industry standards through its professional development programs	Understanding
6.	By attending seminars for professional development, I have honed my networking and job-searching abilities	Improvement
7.	The university offers various professional development programs for different career pathways	Variety
8.	I have the necessary knowledge and drive to engage in professional development activities	Engagement
9.	The university offers state-of-the-art facilities and technology to facilitate the practical development of skills	Technology
10.	Technology and facilities for skill development are easily accessible and convenient to use	Accessibility
11.	The university ensures that its facilities and technology are by the most recent industry standards	Standards
12.	Drawing on the university's resources, I am confident I can confront the technological complexities that will characterize my forthcoming profession	Preparation
13.	The university and international institutions have formed significant alliances	Partnerships
14.	The university's facilitation of industry partnerships provides significant networking prospects	Networking
Career Development Learning		
15.	I am incredibly pleased with the possibilities provided by the institution to develop practical skills related to my field of study	Satisfaction
16.	The university provides adequate support for developing my practical skills	Support
17.	The abilities I obtained during my coursework are highly relevant to the present demands of my target industry	Coalition
18.	I have discovered a significant link between the abilities taught in my education and industry expectations	Correlation
19.	I frequently do self-assessment activities to identify my strengths and limitations to my career goals	Frequency
20.	I am continually evaluating my abilities and goals to shape my career path	Evaluation
21.	Self-reflection allows me to make better professional decisions	Impact
22.	Self-reflection enables me to make confident and informed decisions about my career	Confidence
23.	Self-reflection has allowed me to make more informed career decisions	Informed
24.	Throughout college, I aggressively sought a range of professional pathways and sectors	Activeness
25.	I place a high value on aggressively examining my work possibilities	Prioritization
26.	I seek opportunities to expand my understanding of potential career paths	Awareness
Employability		
27.	I am confident in adapting to new challenges and demonstrating flexibility in various work environments	Adaptability
28.	My effective written and verbal communication skills contribute positively to my employability	Communication
29.	I excel in working collaboratively with diverse teams, contributing to a positive and productive team environment	Collaboration
30.	I possess strong problem-solving skills, allowing me to approach challenges creatively and find innovative solutions	Problem-solving
31.	I actively seek continuous learning and skill development opportunities to stay current in my field	Learning
32.	I have built a solid professional network that enhances my career advancement and employment opportunities	Socializing

The study evaluated the dataset's suitability for factor analysis using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy and Bartlett's test of sphericity. Hair et al. (2018) advised that the test statistic 0.939 from the KMO sample test of adequacy exceeded the specified requirement of 0.8. The Bartlett sphericity test shows that every correlation in the correlation matrix had a significant impact. With 496 de-

grees of freedom and a significance threshold of 0.000, the test yielded an estimated Chi-square value of 12944.571. Based on current theory and previous research, the study then presents evidence for the validity and reliability of the survey instrument, as shown in Table 3. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to assess the associations among observed variables and to validate the underlying hypotheses.

The outcomes presented in Table 3 indicate that Cronbach’s alpha standards for each extracted construct exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70 established by Taber (2018); hence, the constructs were considered reliable for subsequent examination. The revalidation of the extracted constructs included construct reliability (CR) and average variance extract (AVE). The outcomes of CR and AVE, also presented in Table 3, exceeded the recommended threshold standards of CR (= 0.70) and AVE (= 0.50) established by Hair et al. (2018), hence reaffirming convergent validity.

The constructs’ discriminant validity was evaluated using the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) proportion of the correlation criterion. Henseler et al. (2015) developed the HTMT ratio as a superior

method of assessing discriminant validity using a Monte Carlo replication approach to the Fornell and Larcker (1981) criteria, which lacks the necessary sensitivity to effectively identify issues with discriminant validity. The HTMT ratio assesses the average heterotrait-heteromethod correlations in proportion to the average monotrait-heteromethod correlation, with a value below 0.90, suggesting the probable existence of discriminant validity between the construct (Henseler et al., 2015). Table 4 presents the study’s HTMT ratios from the representing constructs.

Table 4 shows that the constructs’ HTMT standards remained below the established threshold of 0.90. This indicates that the reflective constructs prove discriminant validity, reinforcing the ongoing examination.

Table 3. Standardized regression weight, Cronbach’s alpha, construct reliability, and average variance extracted

Construct / Cronbach’s Alpha	Test items	Standardized Regression Weights		
		HEIE	CDL	E
Higher Education Institutions Environment [HEIE] Alpha = 0.951 CR = 0.952 AVE = 0.588	HEIE1_Opportunities	0.682	–	–
	HEIE2_Skillfulness	0.851	–	–
	HEIE3_Communication	0.919	–	–
	HEIE4_Alignment	0.744	–	–
	HEIE5_Understanding	0.864	–	–
	HEIE6_Improvement	0.653	–	–
	HEIE7_Variety	0.635	–	–
	HEIE8_Engagement	0.867	–	–
	HEIE9_Technology	0.812	–	–
	HEIE10_Accessibility	0.731	–	–
	HEIE11_Standards	0.680	–	–
	HEIE12_Preparation	0.686	–	–
	HEIE13_Partnerships	0.656	–	–
	HEIE14_Networking	0.873	–	–
Career Development Learning [CDL] Alpha = 0.930 CR = 0.927 AVE = 0.523	CDL15_Satisfaction	–	0.705	–
	CDL16_Support	–	0.740	–
	CDL17_Coalition	–	0.477	–
	CDL18_Correlation	–	0.838	–
	CDL19_Frequency	–	0.843	–
	CDL20_Evaluation	–	0.674	–
	CDL21_Impact	–	0.857	–
	CDL22_Confidence	–	0.633	–
	CDL23_Informed	–	0.830	–
	CDL24_Activeness	–	0.634	–
Employability [E] Alpha = 0.859 CR = 0.872 AVE = 0.539	CDL25_Prioritization	–	0.517	–
	CDL26_Awareness	–	0.799	–
	E27_Adaptability	–	–	0.851
	E28_Communication	–	–	0.697
	E29_Collaboration	–	–	0.741
	E30_Problem-solving	–	–	0.549
	E31_Learning	–	–	0.887
	E32_Socializing	–	–	0.622

Table 4. Discriminant validity – HTMT criterion

Constructs	HEIE	CDL	E
HEIE	–	–	–
CDL	.866	–	–
E	.840	.898	–

Note: HEIE = Higher Education Institutions Environment; CDL = Career Development Learning; E = Employability.

3. RESULTS

Table 5 presents the constructs' descriptive statistics, which enable an analysis of the data's characteristics.

The mean and standard variation convey and elucidate features of a dataset within the constructs. Table 5 presents the absolute standards of skewness (– 0.367 to + 0.503) and kurtosis (–1.517 to + 0.577), indicating the dataset's normality. Johnson and Wichern (2007) suggest that a dataset is typically regarded as approximating a normal distribution when skewness is between –1 and +1, and kurtosis is between –2 and +2.

The paper utilized structural equation modeling (SEM) and path analysis (PA) with the examination of moment structures (AMOS) software, version 24, to appraise the study hypotheses. Figure 2 illustrates the SEM model, which provides a standardized estimate of each path and the model's predictive capability using multiple correlation coefficients.

The multiple regression coefficients (R^2), presented in Figure 2, are used to determine the model's explanatory power. The CDL ($R^2 = 0.77$) revealed that the HEI environment explained approximately 77.0 percent of the variation. Similarly, the employability ($R^2 = 0.90$) showed that the combination of the HEI environment and the CDL explained approximately 90.0% of the variation in employability. Furthermore, various indices were also observed to test the constructs' model fit. The model fit indices with respective cut-off values are presented in Table 6.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics

Constructs	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness		Kurtosis	
						Statistics	Std. Dev.	Statistics	Std. Dev.
HEIE	3.00	2.00	5.00	3.3632	.69709	.503	.120	–.577	.240
CDL	2.50	1.67	4.17	3.1517	.69179	–.367	.120	–1.517	.240
E	3.33	1.67	5.00	3.2064	.72455	–.004	.120	–1.086	.240

Note: $n = 411$. HEIE = Higher Education Institutions Environment; CDL = Career Development Learning; E = Employability.

As presented in Table 6, the model fit indicators were exemplary according to the accepted cut-off levels established by various researchers. The study utilized a bootstrapping technique with 2,000 resamples and a 95% confidence interval in AMOS to assess the role of the CDL as a mediator amid the HEI environment and employability among young individuals in Nepal. Table 7 displays the unstandardized regression weight (URW), standardized regression weight (SRW), standard error (SE), critical ratios (CR), probability value (p -value), and conclusive observations regarding the specified hypotheses ($H1$ to $H3$) at a 5% significance level. Moreover, Table 7 illustrates the direct effects of the proposed pathways that denote the relationship between two variables without the influence of intermediary components.

Table 8 illustrates the direct, indirect, and total effects on the constructs' associations, assessing the CDL's role as a facilitator between the HEI environment and employability in Nepal. Indirect effects encompass an intervening variable, such as the CDL, which mediates the relationship between the HEI environment and employability. Total effects represent both direct and indirect impacts collectively.

The study elucidates insights into the impact of the HEI environment on employability with the CDL by examining various effects through AMOS software analysis. The analysis reveals a direct influence of the HEI environment on employment opportunities in Nepal ($\beta = 0.038$, $p > 0.05$), indicating a positive yet insignificant association ($H1$). The

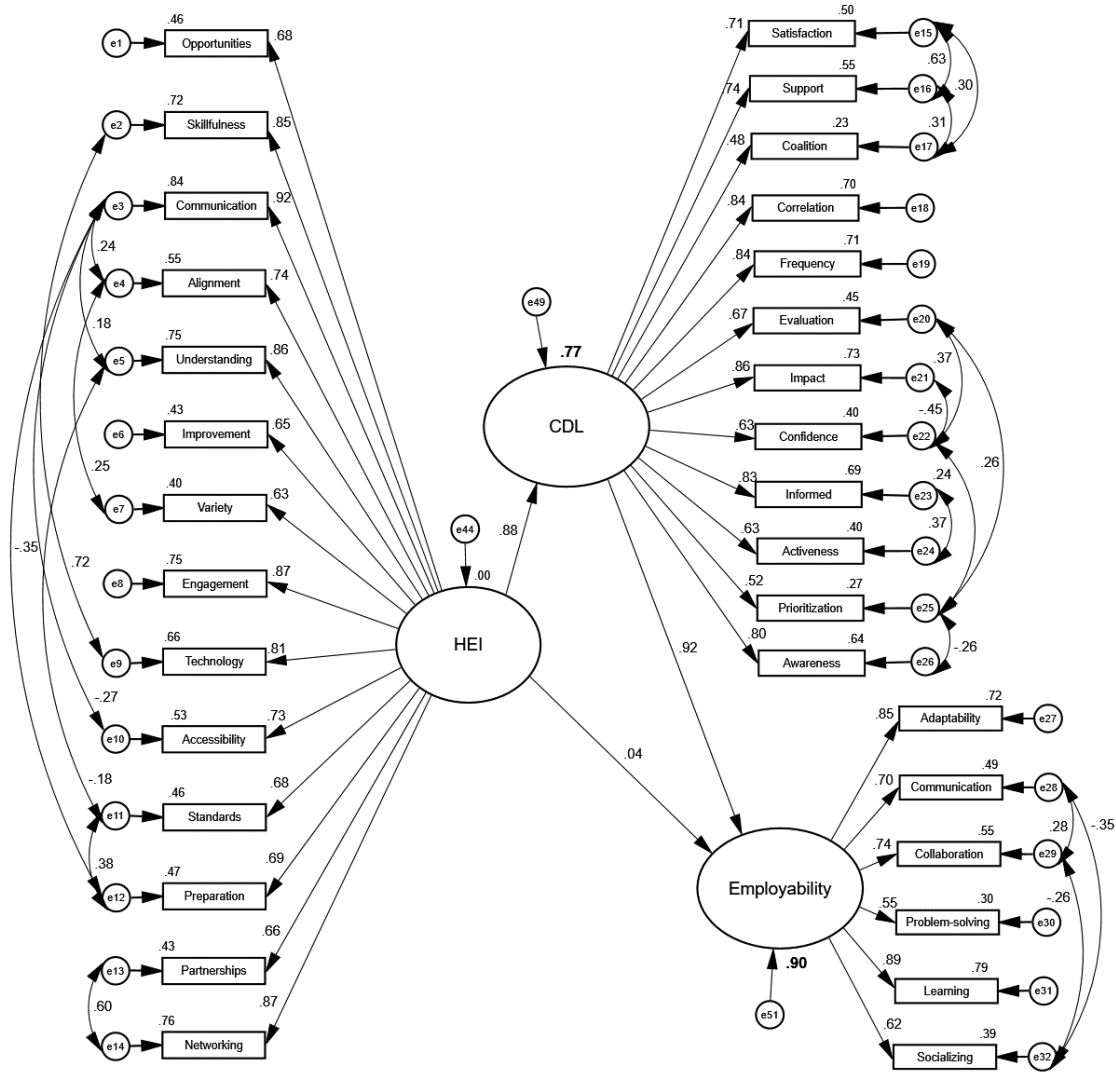


Figure 2. Structural equation model and path analysis

HEI environment has a direct effect on the CDL ($\beta = 0.878, p < 0.05$), confirming a positive and substantial relationship (*H2*). Similarly, the CDL has a direct effect on employability ($\beta = 0.915, p < 0.05$), indicating a positive and significant association (*H3*). Finally, the study revealed a noteworthy and positive association of the CDL ($\beta = 0.803, p < 0.05$) as a facilitator between the HEI environment and the employability of young individuals in Nepal. The hypotheses summary is shown in Table 9 based on the regression analysis.

Employability is positively correlated with the HEIE, a claim that lacks substantiation in the Nepalese context. Such finding suggests that although the HEI environment may affect several aspects of students' learning and experiences, its direct effect on employability is not statistically

significant. The finding indicates that employability relies on various factors, including personal competencies, industry requirements, or external job market conditions, rather than solely on the institutional setting. The HEI environment may, however, indirectly enhance employability through alternative avenues, such as career development courses.

The findings of the second hypothesis affirm that the HEI environment significantly and positively impacts CDL. The HEIs with adequate resources, career support, industry connections, and experiential learning opportunities are more inclined to foster an environment that equips students with the skills and knowledge required for a successful career. Such a finding underscores the importance of a supportive HEI environment in promoting effective CDL pro-

Table 6. Model fit indices with cut-off values

Model fit measures	Cut-off value	Suggested by	Model values
Chi-square (χ^2)	Smaller the better	Wan (2002)	2702.202
Probability (p)	> 0.05	Wan (2002)	0.000
Normed chi square [χ^2/df]	≤ 3.00	Kline (2016)	6.141
Standardized Root Mean-square Residual [SRMR]	≤ 0.08	Hu and Bentler (1999)	0.052
Root Mean Square Error of Approximation [RMSEA]	≤ 0.08	Hu and Bentler (1999)	0.074
RMSEA Associated p-value [PCLOSE]	≥ 0.05	Garson (2019)	0.000
Goodness of Fit Index [GFI]	≥ 0.90	Bagozzi and Yi (1988)	0.898
Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index [AGFI]	≥ 0.80	Bagozzi and Yi (1988)	0.869
Relative Fit Index (RFI)	≥ 0.80	Hair et al. (2018)	0.871
Comparative Fit Index [CFI]	≥ 0.90	Hu and Bentler (1999)	0.924
Normed Fit Index [NFI]	≥ 0.80	Bentler and Bonnet (1980)	0.897
Tucker Lewis Index [TLI]	≥ 0.90	Hu and Bentler (1999)	0.901

Table 7. Hypotheses testing– Direct effects

Hypotheses	Paths	URW	SRW	SE	SR	p-value	Remarks
H1	HEIE → E	.054	.038	.088	.612	.540	Not supported
H2	HEIE → CDL	.680	.878	.072	9.418	***	Supported
H3	CDL → E	1.680	.915	.200	8.413	***	Supported

Note: *** Significant at the 0.01 level. HEIE = Higher Education Institutions Environment; CDL = Career Development Learning; E = Employability.

grams. A significant association exists between the CDL and employability, highlighting the necessity of career development initiatives in equipping students for the workforce. CDL activities, including internships, seminars, resume-building workshops, and career counseling, provide students with practical skills and industry-relevant knowledge, enhancing their employability. Therefore, the study highlights the tangible advantages of a CDL in meeting employer expectations among students.

Although the HEI environment did not significantly influence employability (H1), it indirectly enhanced employability by promoting effective

CDL. The study revealed that a supportive HEI environment enhances CDL, improving employability. The mediating role of CDL connects institutional factors with individual outcomes, emphasizing the need for structured career development initiatives at HEIs. Therefore, HEIs must prioritize enhancing the CDL programs, which serve as the essential connection between institutional resources and employability outcomes. By cultivating an environment that promotes and supports CDL, the HEIs can indirectly enhance students' employability and ensure they are adequately prepared for the competitive job market.

Table 8. Hypotheses testing – Direct, indirect, and total effects of the model

Hypotheses	Paths	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Total Effect	Remarks
H4	HEIE → CDL → E	0.038 (p = 0.794)	0.803 (p = 0.001)	0.841 (p = 0.001)	Mediation (Yes)

Note: HEIE = Higher Education Institutions Environment; CDL = Career Development Learning; E = Employability.

Table 9. Hypotheses summary

Hypotheses	Remarks
H1	Employability has a positive and significant association with the HEIs environment
H2	The HEI environment significantly and positively influences CDL
H3	Participation in CDL significantly improves employability
H4	The CDL mediates the relationship between the HEI environment and employability

4. DISCUSSION

This study elucidates the multifaceted interplay between the HEI environment, career development learning (CDL), and employability among youth in Nepal. The findings indicate that the HEI environment alone does not directly result in substantial enhancements in employability; nonetheless, CDL is essential for connecting educational experiences with labor market success. The paper indicated that the HEI environment exerted a mild and statistically negligible direct effect on employability (*H1*). Such findings suggest that while colleges provide resources, facilities, and academic programs, these elements fail to adequately prepare students for the workforce. Recent research confirms that improving educational infrastructure or curricula alone is insufficient unless students possess the necessary skills to manage their careers effectively (Clarke, 2018; Ghimire et al., 2024; Römogens et al., 2020).

The study furthermore indicates that the HEI environment significantly enhances CDL (*H2*), implying that a well-organized educational setting can promote career-oriented learning and personal development opportunities. Students in conducive higher education institutions are more inclined to participate in activities that augment their employability abilities, including internships, career workshops, and job placements. These experiences facilitate the development of self-efficacy, adaptability, and career decision-making abilities essential for professional success.

The findings mainly validated the significant mediation effect of CDL between the HEI environment and employability (*H3, H4*). CDL significantly enhances employability, as the findings indicate that students engaged in career development activities are more likely to attain employment ($\beta = 0.915, p < 0.05$). This reinforces that employability encompasses more than merely acquiring technical skills or academic credentials; it entails a broader array

of competencies and learning experiences that augment professional preparedness.

The mediating effect of CDL indicates that it assists students in converting the resources and assistance provided by higher education institutions into concrete career results. CDL initiatives, including career counseling, mentorship programs, and career planning workshops, provide students with essential skills and information to effectively navigate the intricacies of the job market. This is especially significant in low- and middle-income nations such as Nepal, where socioeconomic obstacles may hinder students from effectively translating their academic accomplishments into professional success.

Furthermore, the findings align with several career development theories analyzed in the literature review. SCCT shows the significance of self-efficacy, goal-setting, and proactive career management, all essential elements of CDL (Lent, 2021). The CDL supports the principle of CCT, which emphasizes the significance of adaptability and occupational identity in managing career trajectories and encourages student ownership of career development (Savickas, 2021). The study's results align with SDT, emphasizing the importance of independence, proficiency, and relatedness in promoting motivation and personal development. Participation in CDL activities fosters autonomy and self-determination in students, thereby augmenting their willingness to pursue significant career trajectories (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This indicates that colleges can significantly contribute to enhancing students' intrinsic motivation by offering opportunities for job development courses. This study's findings show the essential function of CDL as a facilitator that aids students in converting their educational experiences into employment outcomes. The HEI environment alone may not directly promote employability, but adopting comprehensive CDL programs can substantially improve students' career preparedness and success in the labor market.

CONCLUSION

The primary objective was to examine the association between the higher education institution environment, career development learning, and employability among young adults in Nepal. The

findings underscore a complex interaction among these elements, indicating that the higher education institution environment alone does not significantly impact employability. Career development learning was a crucial intermediary, connecting the educational environment with students' employment opportunities. This highlights the essential function of career development learning in equipping students with the demands of the modern job market. The findings highlight that participation in career development learning programs significantly improves students' professional readiness. Students cultivate key skills, confidence, and self-efficacy necessary for navigating intricate working environments through engagement in career counseling, mentorship, internships, and job-orientated courses. These programs facilitate the development of resilience and flexibility in students – attributes increasingly essential in a dynamic and competitive employment landscape.

The study enhances the current understanding of employability by highlighting the importance of including career development education in higher education courses. The findings indicate that higher education institutions in Nepal should prioritize disseminating academic information and enhancing practical job development initiatives. Such initiatives can link students' competencies more effectively with employer expectations, improving their preparedness to transition from education to employment. Moreover, the essential mediating function of career development learning highlights its strategic significance for synchronizing education with job results. Universities must invest specific resources to cultivate and promote career development learning programs, guaranteeing that students have access to chances that improve their job prospects. Initiatives centered on employment search techniques, competency development workshops, and practical learning can substantially enhance the formation of a proficient and self-assured workforce.

The study underscores the significance of incorporating career development learning programs as a crucial component of higher education reform. Initiatives within higher education institutions can significantly contribute to overarching development objectives. Graduates possessing practical skills and job preparedness are better positioned to contribute significantly to the labor market, promoting economic growth and social advancement. The study emphasizes the significance of career development and learning as a crucial connection between education and work. By prioritizing these measures, higher education institutions in Nepal can reconcile the disparity between academic training and workplace requirements, ultimately equipping graduates for job success and contributing to national developmental objectives.

The study's shortcoming is in its focus on Nepal, rendering the generalizability of the conclusions to other cultural or economic situations unfeasible. Future research can examine replicating the findings in different countries, particularly in low- and middle-income situations, to see if the links between the HEI environment, career development learning, and employability are consistent across varied socioeconomic differentiation. Research could solve the constraint by using cross-country demographic checks that track students' employability results in multiple educational backgrounds, covering a diverse understanding of career development learning and its influence on individuals' long-term professional success. Moreover, prospective research should examine how HEIs can integrate digital literacy into career development learning programs to better prepare students for the evolving workforce demands, enhance existing findings, and foster more effective strategies for improving employability through career development learning.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization: Rewan Kumar Dahal, Binod Ghimire, Dilli Raj Sharma, Dipendra Karki, Surendra Prasad Joshi.

Data curation: Rewan Kumar Dahal, Dilli Raj Sharma, Dipendra Karki, Surendra Prasad Joshi.

Formal analysis: Rewan Kumar Dahal.

Funding acquisition: Binod Ghimire.

Investigation: Dilli Raj Sharma.

Methodology: Rewan Kumar Dahal, Dipendra Karki.

Project administration: Rewan Kumar Dahal, Binod Ghimire.

Resources: Binod Ghimire, Dilli Raj Sharma, Surendra Prasad Joshi.

Software: Rewan Kumar Dahal, Dipendra Karki.

Supervision: Rewan Kumar Dahal, Binod Ghimire.

Validation: Binod Ghimire, Dilli Raj Sharma, Dipendra Karki, Surendra Prasad Joshi.

Writing – original draft: Rewan Kumar Dahal, Binod Ghimire, Surendra Prasad Joshi.

Writing – review & editing: Rewan Kumar Dahal, Binod Ghimire, Dilli Raj Sharma, Dipendra Karki.

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