An exploration of students' and teachers' experiences of the new grading system in Secondary Education Examinations in Chitwan District of Nepal

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Liverpool John Moores University for the degree of Philosophy
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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this PhD thesis to my late Father Mr. Ram Hari Giri and my mother Mrs.Rohini Devi Giri

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Declarations

The document referred to as the Declaration I thus affirm that this thesis constitutes an authentic and independent scholarly contribution. This document is being submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Liverpool John Moores University, located in England. The present work has not been previously submitted for any academic degree or published elsewhere, including in the form of excerpts or any other derivative form.

Submitted by

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Liverpool John Moores University August 2026

Abstract

This study explores students' and teachers' experiences with Nepal's new Secondary Education Examination (SEE). This system was introduced in 2016 as part of the abolition of the School Leaving Certificate (SLC) examinations and the reduction of examination pressure through a new letter-graded system. The study is firmly rooted in a constructivist and phenomenological approach, reflecting a commitment to understanding lived experience and subjective meaning. Qualitative data were collected from students, teachers, and government officials in the Chitwan District through focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. The findings indicate that the SEE system, which has reduced students' examination stress and fear of failure, has not been implemented uniformly, nor have the examination concerns been addressed uniformly. Students liked the 'no-fail' system but were uneasy about the implications of its 'GPA' calculation and, in general, its fairness. Teachers preferred the reduction in workload and the increase in the pass rate but felt that there was no clear guidance on the procedure for implementing the syllabus and a complete lack of technical support, including training. Educationalists saw the underlying value of the reform but insisted that greater standardisation of examinations and assessments, as well as greater teacher training, is now needed. In general terms, the participants indicated that, although the SEE is a step towards educational reform, much greater emphasis on the policy's overall direction is required. The study has significant implications for the Ministry of Education, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs), and donor organisations, if education in Nepal is to be fulfilled in its true educational meaning and purpose.

Keywords: SEE, grading system, grading reform, students'experience, teachers' experience, Nepal, assessment reform, constructivism.

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List of Abbreviations

CDC	Curriculum Development Centre
CEB	Central Examination Board
CGO	Central Government Official
CERID	Research Centre of Education, Innovation and Development
CTEVT	Council for Technical Education and Vocational Training
DEO	District Education Office
DOE	Department of Education
EPDC	Education policy and Data Centre
ERO	Education Review Office
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
GPA	Grade Point Average
HISSAN	Higher Secondary Schools' Association Nepal
LGWP	Letter Grading Working Procedure
MOE	Ministry of Education
NPC	National Planning Commission
NEB	National Examination Board
NESP	National Education System Plan of Nepal
PABSON	Private and Boarding Schools' Organization Nepal
SEE	Secondary Education Examinations
SLC	School Leaving Certificate

SSDP	School Sector Development Plan
SSI	Semi-Structure Interview
SSRP	School Sector Reform Plan
TSC	Teacher Service Commission
VDC	Village development committee
KM	Khairahani Municipality

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This chapter provides the background of the study and explains the rationale for conducting this research regarding the transition from traditional number-based (percentile) grading to letter grading in Nepal and what this means for teachers and students in the Chitwan district this study has explored.

Beginning with a general description of the geography of Nepal, I can then describe

the history of education in Nepal, which includes the development of the structure of governance for education in Nepal and major education reforms. As part of this

In this section, I will discuss how changes from SLC to SEE have affected student evaluations, as well as how the broader shift from numeric to letter grades has shaped student evaluation processes throughout the education system.

Additionally, I will describe the development of the study, including how the idea came to mind, the aims and research questions that drove the work and the study investigation, as well as my personal interest in undertaking this research. My motivation for the study started as a small pilot project; and then grew into a PhD study reflecting both my direct interest and my personal and professional interests as a researcher. Finally, I close this chapter with a list outlining the structure of the thesis.

1.2 Geographical Context of Nepal

Nepal is a landlocked nation characterised by a diverse array of cultures, religions, and ethnicities. The country encompasses a total land area of 147,181 square kilometres (MOFA, 2020). It shares boundaries with China to the North, east, and West, and India to the South. It is segmented into three ecological zones: mountains, hills, and Terai. The mountainous region comprises 24% of the nation's total land area; hilly regions account for 56%, and the Terai encompasses around 20% of the entire area (Poudel and Silwal, 2020). It consists of 77 districts and seven provinces (MOFA, 2020). Approximately 30.3 million individuals inhabit Nepal (World Bank, 2022).

Nepal ranks among the poorest nations globally, with a quarter of its populace subsisting below the poverty threshold of USD 0.50-per-day (World Food

Programme, 2025). The country has been ranked 143rd out of 189 countries, with the Human Development Index (HDI) among the lowest (UNDP, 2022). Similarly, the country is still recovering from the ten year long civil war which ended in 2006, the massive earthquakes of 2015, and Covid -19 (United States Agency for International Development, 2015).

In the massive 2015 earthquake, approximately 9,000 individuals died, 22,000 sustained injuries, 2.6 million were displaced, and over 750,000 houses were damaged (Swain, 2016). A significant loss of agricultural assets, equipment, livestock, and productivity transpired (FAO, 2015; NPC, 2015). After the earthquake, Nepal has made substantial progress in the social, economic, and political spheres, as evidenced by the Universal Health Coverage (UHC) Index, which increased from 45 in 2017 to 54 in 2021 (World Bank, 2023). Having provided an overview of Nepal's geographical background and the wider challenges the country has experienced; the following section considers the development of its education system and the significant reforms it has implemented.

1.3 The Education System in Nepal

Nepal's education system has undergone substantial changes following amendments to the 2015 Constitution (Government of Nepal, 2015). The most important change was to reshape the current system into a three-tier government structure which connects local, provincial, and federal governments. This was done to address localised requirements. Education in Nepal comprises four different levels: early childhood and development (ECED), basic education (grades 1-8), secondary education (grades 9-12) and vocational/technical education (World Bank, 2023).

1.4 Assembly of the Education System

In 2016, Nepal integrated primary and lower secondary education, creating Basic Education (grades 1-8), and extended secondary education to grades 9-12. This reform was part of the Education Act 2016 and the School Sector Development Plan, aimed at reflecting international norms in education. These changes began in 2016 and were gradually implemented nationwide (School Sector Development Plan, 2016). The table below provides a detailed scheme of reforms.

Earlier School Structure		Reformed School Structure
Pre-primary / Early childhood	→	Early Childhood Development / Pre-primary
Primary (Grades 1–5)	→	Basic Education (Grades 1–8)
Lower Secondary (Grades 6–8)	→	Basic Education (Grades 1–8)
Secondary (Grades 9–10)	→	Secondary Education (Grades 9–12)
Higher Secondary (Grades 11–12)	→	

Table 1: Present and fully reformed School Structure

Early Childhood Development Programmes are for children aged 3 through age five. They can be delivered by a variety of entities, including public and private schools and other community-based organisations. By 2024, there were over 41,184 Early Childhood Education and Development Centres operating across Nepal. More than eighty per cent of all ECD centres in Nepal are operated by the Government. Children's participation in ECED programmes has reached 90.4 percent of enrolment. The participation was very good. However, children with special needs or those who are part of marginalised groups have not had sufficient representation in these programs. Basic education in Nepal includes grades one through eight. Basic education in Nepal is both free and compulsory. Access to basic education in Nepal is also very high, with 35,000 institutions providing services that meet government educational standards. While access to and participation in education at this level are very high, they begin to decline significantly once students reach secondary

school. The reason for this decline is primarily socio-economic (i.e., poor families require their children to enter the labour force early, etc.) (Edusanjal, 2024).

Secondary education in Nepal comprises Grades 9–12. At the end of Grade 10, students sit for the Secondary Education Examination (SEE), while Grade 12 students finish with a final examination administered by the National Examination Board (NEB). At the end of Grade 10, students sit for the Secondary Education Examination (SEE), while Grade 12 students finish with a final examination administered by the National Examination Board (NEB). As of 2024, there were 7,468 schools offering up to Grade 10 and 5,049 schools offering up to Grade 12 (Edusanjal, 2024). Finally, vocational/technical education is regulated by the federal government and bodies such as the University Grants Commission (UGC) and the Council for Technical Education and Vocational Training (CTEVT). These bodies are responsible for managing public campuses and training centres and for ensuring quality and proper infrastructure.

1.5 Governance Structure Through Government Levels

The federal Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) holds general responsibility for policy and national-level management. It conducts these operations through central agencies such as the Curriculum Development Centre (CDC), the Teacher Service Commission (TSC), and the Centre for Education and Human Resource Development (CEHRD). In turn, these bodies oversee curriculum standardisation, staff allocation, and certification for teachers and institutions (MoEST, 2023).

On the other hand, provincial authorities are accountable for delivering the government's directives and for supervising their implementation in schools and community organisations. They are supported by Education Development and Coordination Units (EDCUs) at the regional level, which represent cooperation bodies connecting schools and local governments (Edusanjal, 2024).

1.6 Curriculum and Grading Reform

Along with fundamental reforms, Nepal has revamped its curriculum and assessment system, particularly implementing a shift from the numerical marking system of the SLC to the letter grading system of the SEE. The creation of Letter Grades (LGS) was designed to reduce high-stakes pressure on students and to

convey better results (Singh, 2025). Pal (2022) expresses the process of grading reform as techniques designed to increase the measurement and significance of necessary expertise, abilities and experiences, changing over from rote learning to evaluation by reference to competency.

However, initial studies show that struggles with implementation persist. Singh's (2025) research in Surkhet showed that many of the parties concerned were in favour of change, but that opposition still existed, with reference to the practical implications of GPA scores and as to the transparency of marking standards. In Chitwan, students in secondary schools stated both positive and critical views (Adhikari, 2019). There was a sentiment that letter grades might reduce examination stress, but that for some they also embodied a decrease in academic diligence. Kafle (2020) argues that the grading system does bring considerable challenges for teachers, particularly in their assessment process, leading them to confusion and stress.

These revisions indicate challenging contextual problems in reforming assessment practices: inadequate teacher training, varied school facilities, and differing knowledge of the essential relationships among students and parents. All in all, these studies demonstrate that a simple policy statement is not enough to bring about change. The SLC assessment system preceding the SEE The SLC was organized. reform that caused these challenges must be understood first in order to determine why they developed after the new grading system was introduced.

1.6.1 SLC Assessment

The *School Leaving Certificate (SLC)* examination functioned as Nepal's national-level final examinations for Year 10 students and was often considered equivalent to the GCSE in England in terms of academic qualification. It was centrally managed and supervised by the Office of the Controller of Examinations (OCE), under the Ministry of Education, and was conducted simultaneously across all districts of Nepal (Ministry of Education, 2015; Office of Controller of Examinations, 2018).

The pedagogy associated with the SLC system was primarily based on rote learning (Pherali, 2012). Assessments are held every year in April or May. The SLC was organised as a criterion-referenced assessment (Lok, McNaught and Young, 2015). In this approach, student accomplishment was evaluated against predefined national

criteria rather than being determined through competitive ranking (norm-referenced assessment), in which students are ranked, and their relative performance is distinguished. The SLC national curriculum consisted of six compulsory subjects, which are Nepali, English, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, and Health and Population Studies and two optional subjects chosen by students and schools (Office of Controller of Examinations, 2018).

To pass, students were expected to achieve at least 32 marks out of 100 in each subject, which signified the national minimum standard for competency. Students failing in up to two subjects could re-sit supplementary (compartment) examinations, generally conducted one month after the main results were released. Those failing in more than two subjects had to wait a full year to re-take the examination alongside the next cohort.

These marks were classified into four divisions:

Marks obtained	Remarks
70% and above	Distinction
60%-69%	First Division
41%-59%	Second Division
32%-40%	Third Division

Table 2: Grades classification of SLC

'Achieving well' in the SLC was officially defined as achieving either Distinction (≥ 80%) or First Division (≥ 60 %), which implied strong academic achievement according to national standards (OCE, 2018; Bhatta, 2005). Students achieving Distinction or First Division were qualified for admission into higher-secondary streams such as Science or Engineering. For instance, Year 11 admission to Science and Engineering programmes mandatory at least First Division results, while Humanities and Arts streams required a regular pass in all subjects (securing 32 out of 100).

Success in the SLC exam was broadly observed as a key factor of upward social progress. As Bhatta (2005) argued, numerous parents and students understood failure in the SLC as an individual failure, while achieving high grades

was associated with reputation and greater opportunities for higher education and employment. Bhattarai (2014) correspondingly noted that the SLC brought immense symbolic significance as a gateway to social status and economic improvement. The insights of both parents and students increased the SLC's status as a high-stakes examination, a trend common across many Asian contexts where academic success is traditionally prized (Khaniya and Williams, 2004).

Therefore, the SLC became the centre of attention for all key education stakeholders, including administrators, government policymakers, students, teachers, and parents as a national standard for educational quality and accountability (Mathema, 2007; Division, 1994). To address the limitations and pressures associated with the SLC examination, the Ministry of Education replaced it with a new national assessment framework, the Secondary Education Examination (SEE).

1.6.2 SEE Assessment.

The Secondary Education Examination (SEE) was introduced in 2016 by the Nepalese government to address the well-known problems of the School Leaving Certificate (SLC) exam. The most crucial objective was to reduce the substantial academic stress associated with the SLC, which some consider the most stressful part of schooling, and to foster a competency-based examination system. The SEE replaced the previous pass-fail grading system with a letter-based grading system, bringing Nepal's examination system into line with international frameworks (CERID, 2016; Ministry of Education, 2015). The most crucial reason for the SEE implementation was the introduction of individual-subject certification.

This provision empowered students who had failed in one or two subjects to secure recognition for those subjects in which they had demonstrated that they had passed, while they could continue their studies into Year 11 and re-sit in the subjects in which they had failed. This outcome was intended to limit the dropout rate and make education more inclusive, since it established partial academic success (Office of Controller of Examinations, 2018). The Eighth Amendment to the Education Act 1972, promulgated in 2016, required that all public and private schools expand their provision to Grades 11 and 12, creating a unified secondary education structure (Ministry of Education, 2015). The SEE thus developed into the terminal national

examination at the end of Grade 10, usually taken by students 14–16 years, before they proceeded to higher secondary education.

The previous SLC examination had long been known in Nepal as the Iron Gate, a term used by students, teachers and parents to indicate that it was a demanding, challenging, and life-limiting barrier that determined prospects. If success was achieved, it was considered a sign of progress; if failure occurred, it was frequently coupled with feelings of shame and stigma, as well as a sense of wasted opportunities (Bhatta, 2005; Bhattarai, 2014). The SEE was believed to replace this critical Iron Gate with a more valuable, formative, and student-centred examination system. The SEE is criterion-based, which means that students' accomplishment is shaped by a fixed criterion or standard of performance, rather than by association with the performance of other students. The grading requirements and the national standardisation of assessment are set by the National Education Board (NEB). Since 2017, notable revisions have been made to the curriculum and examination requirements for compulsory subjects.

This has taken the form of an increased emphasis on theoretical understanding, resulting in improved performance (NEB, 2017; Office of the Controller of Examinations, 2018a). The important modifications to the curriculum and assessment regulations were made to make learning more practical and student-centred in orientation. In English and Nepali, for instance, 25 % of the marks are allocated to listening and speaking components of the exam, with the aim of ensuring that students develop standardised communication skills. In Mathematics, on the other hand, memory exercises, e.g., repeated division were found to be of little use, and this approach was replaced by exercises challenging students to solve applied problems and use unitary methods, demanding a high standard of conceptual thinking. In Social Studies, again, 25% of the total marks are allocated to project work that requires research and promotes learning through analytical and experimental approaches.

Similarly, Science and Health Education combine lab work and fieldwork, so both subjects now lend themselves to a more constructive internal evaluation system. In all, therefore, each of the compulsory subjects now demands a system of internal (practical and continuous) assessment to the extent of 25% of the total marks, and an external examination accounting for 75%. This reflects the Government's aim to

encourage more active student participation and reduce the stress of memory-based work that SLC examinations used to emphasise (Board, 2017; Office of the Controller of Examinations, 2018a).

Therefore, these are the marking criteria of SEE are presented below:

Marks obtained	Grade Remarks	Grade Point Average
90-100	A+ Outstanding	4.0
80-89	Excellent	3.6
70-79	B+ very good	3.2
60-69	B Good	2.8
50-59	C+ Satisfactory	2.4
40-49	C Acceptable	2.0
30-39	D+ Partially Acceptable	1.6
20-29	D Insufficient	1.2
0-20	E Very Insufficient	0.8

Table 3: Grade classification of SEE (when first launched in 2016)

In a similar way, the Grade Point Average (GPA) reflects a student's overall performance across all subjects. Each subject's letter grade is transformed into a numerical grade point (e.g., A+ = 4.0, A = 3.6, B+ = 3.2, etc.), and the **GPA** is computed as the arithmetic mean of all these points through compulsory and optional subjects (CERID, 2016; National Education Board, 2017).

For example, if a student produces grade points of 4.0, 3.6, 3.2, 3.2, 2.8, and 2.4 in six subjects, their GPA = (4.0 + 3.6 + 3.2 + 3.2 + 2.8 + 2.4) ÷ 6 = 3.2. This average corresponds to a Very Good performance on the 0–4 scale. This method replaced the traditional pass/fail model of SLC and provides a more comprehensive and internationally equivalent interpretation of academic performance (Sadler, 2016; Singh, 2025).

The current literature on the SEE grading system shows the intention of the educational reform; however, it does not demonstrate how that experience is felt and experienced by all who will be working with and within it. Therefore, the following section will critically examine the current literature to show where a knowledge gap exists and why there is an immediate need for this project.

1.7 Research Gap and Empirical Justification

Although recent Nepal-focused studies have mapped broad themes of federalization and educational administration, they provide limited insight into school-level needs (**Government of Nepal,** et al., 2019). When this study was commenced, I identified a gap when I started my PhD while there was little empirically based research about how students and teachers experienced the SEE reform was limited in newspaper articles or maximum master's thesis, most of what did exist concentrated on specific subjects or individual stakeholder groups. So, this study explored how students and teachers experienced and implemented the SEE letter-grading reform in everyday practice; the available literature was largely drawn from international sources.

After the data collection for this study was completed, several additional research studies focused specifically on Nepal emerged. These included studies that examined the views of students (Shahi, 2023; Adhikari, 2019), and/or the perspectives and analysis of teachers and concepts related to teaching (Pal, 2022). The latter studies tended to be based solely upon one stakeholder group being either students or teachers; while using mostly documentation-based research methods and incorporating very little field verification through triangulation. Additionally, most studies have concentrated on one subject area or an urban context (e.g., EFL teachers in Kathmandu); therefore, they did not adequately link classroom-based experience to larger policy/governance changes made by the Government of Nepal during the transition to a federal system.

At the macro level, Bhattarai (2019) provided an important contribution using constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz-informed) to theories the SLC assessment reform process from conceptualization to early outcomes, yielding a three-phase national-level account with practical recommendations (e.g., capacity-building, clearer guidance, monitoring and evaluation, and integration of practical and theoretical marks).

Nevertheless, my study addresses that gap by examining the lived experiences of both stakeholders during SEE implementation, triangulating their perspectives with supplementary insights from government officials, and comparing public and private schools within one district. This study therefore contributes a grounded, multi-perspective account of how the SEE grading system is understood, endorsed, and contested in practice, an aspect that was absent in early research and only partially addressed by subsequent studies (Adhikari, 2019; Pal, 2022; Shahi, 2023), while complementing Bhattarai's national-level theorization. Having recognized an area where no prior research exists or is lacking and having also outlined how my study will contribute to existing knowledge in the area; The next segment describes the precise goal of my research.

Objective of the Study

This study aimed to address the literature gap by exploring the opportunities and challenges created by the SEE.

1.8 Research Questions

This study explores the SEE grading system through the experiences of students and teachers by addressing the following research questions:

1 How are students and teachers experiencing SEE? What do they see as the advantages and disadvantages of this new system?
2 What are the issues and challenges in this new secondary education examination system?
3 To what extent are the issues identified as difficulties in SLC being resolved in SEE?
4 What issues have arisen in relation to curriculum, teacher training, assessment, and student attitudes in implementing this new system?

1.9 Inspiration and Significance of Study

Since my childhood, I have always been interested in the education sector and how we experienced our educational system is always different from one another. In other words, everyone's experience is different from person to person.

The encouragement for me in this study stems from the researcher's extended academic engagement in the United Kingdom, where I studied for over 8 years before embarking on my PhD journey. During my time abroad, I was deeply astonished by the democratic values rooted in the UK's education system. One of

the most substantial structures I encountered were the standardisation of student voice where students are heard, and even expected to reason about their prospects, investigate established norms, actively influence classroom discussion. Such settings foster critical thinking, build self-confidence, and increase the value of each student's unique voice.

This democratic organizational culture of student engagement and respect for student opinion stood in sharp contrast to my own experience as a student in Nepal; where I experienced silenced and powerless classroom environments that discouraged open discussions and critical thinking. The contrast between these two educational scenarios intrigued me greatly; one where student empowerment is embraced and another where it is restricted became a point of deep reflection for me. What originally started as a sense of unease gradually transformed into an academic interest. The investigation delved into understanding how students and teachers at the secondary level, in Nepal navigate through the challenges posed by the recent and abrupt introduction of the Secondary Education Examination (SEE) system.

The relevance of this examination became clearer when I observed the application of the SEE reform without in-depth consultation or meaningful grassroots engagement affecting teachers and students who were directly involved but rarely consulted before being asked to adjust. This gap in communication motivated me to conduct a study aiming to represent the voices of those stakeholders typically left out of official policy discussions. By emphasizing their real-life experience, the research aims to bridge the divide between policymaking and actual classroom circumstances.

I had both the cultural and contextually aware perspective of being a Nepalese person who has personally experienced Nepal's education system (the "insider" aspect), as well as an outsider view through my later education in the United Kingdom and current status as a Doctoral Researcher; I will be using that in the critical reflection of my insider-outsider positionality and how it may have influenced my research process in chapter three.

Furthermore, students often face emotional pressure due to strict and high-pressure assessment systems, and education policy decisions can spark important ethical

debates about their social impact. For example, the SLC had been in place for 80 years before the SEE was launched.

When I began this PhD journey, I found a prominent gap in the academic literature: despite the social urgency of the issue, there were very few significant academic studies that explored students' or teachers' experiences of the SEE reform at the doctoral level however limited to subject areas. The invisibility of these perceptions in academic debates further prompted the need to undertake a qualitative investigation into one that prioritizes human practices and recognizes the sensitive, social, and official dimensions of educational reform.

The implication of the study is therefore in two aspects. First, it provides a practical exploration of how the SEE system is experienced on the ground, based on this study particularly within the Chitwan District, which also happens to be my hometown. The selection of Chitwan as a location for this research was influenced by few factors that made it a suitable site, but I will be discussing in greater detail in Chapter 3 why it was selected and how I personally reflected on its suitability.

Having established the rationale for the research location, the pilot study provided the next important stage in shaping the development of the main study.

After the pilot study and its results were analysed, the significance of the main study with larger sample sizes for interviews and focus group discussions became clearer. This provincial anchoring enhances the contextual depth and personal meaning to this research.

Second, the research contributes to a broader understanding of how top-down reforms work together with embedded classroom cultures and academic practices. It reveals not just challenges but also the capacity of the SEE system to produce both its envisioned results and unintended consequences, including the potential relief of psychological and emotional distress among students.

In principle, it is both motivated by and seeks to intervene in the space between these two poles. By documenting the experiences of students and teachers, the study carries implication for educational representatives, curriculum designers, and teachers. It aims to inform future reforms that are not only technically sound but also socially appropriate, ethically supported, and inclusive of those whose lives are

affected by their implementation. In essence, the whole study has been conducted, and the structure of the thesis is given below.

1.10 Thesis Structure

My aim for this study is to shed light on the various aspects of the implementation of the Secondary Education Examination (SEE) system and its consequences in the context of Nepal's secondary education. The underlying principle of this approach is based on the commitment to have a comprehensive understanding of the real-life experiences and viewpoints of the individuals who are most impacted, namely students and teachers, which will yield significant and indispensable knowledge for the progress of education not just in Nepal but also in other contexts. Therefore,

This thesis is structured as follows:

- **Chapter 1** presents the relevant background, justification, or rationale, and objectives of the study.
- **Chapter 2** reviews relevant literature relating to grading systems, reform of the letter grading system in education, rights-based recognition for young people and evaluation processes domestically and internationally.
- **Chapter 3** describes and justifies the methodology used in the research project, including design, participants, sampling, data collection, analysis, and ethical considerations, with critical reflection on positionality and cross-cultural research practices.
- **Chapter 4** describes and analyses the findings related to the experiences of the participants.
- **Chapter 5** discusses the findings in relation to existing literature.
- **Chapter 6** concludes the study with a summary of relevant original contributions, implications for policy and practice, recommendations and future research.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The following literature review has been organised systematically to discuss important concepts, practices, and debates related to grading standards in education. Grades remain one of the most enduring and controversial aspects of schooling with consequences for student achievement and motivation. The literature review begins with a review of grading beginning with the historical evolution of grading, definition of grading, and the purpose of grading. It then explores traditional and standards-based grading systems, their challenges, and a comparison of these two grading models.

Following that, the literature review explores the experience with grading system implementation globally, bringing international studies in the context of Nepalese experience. It highlights how contextual factors such as policy and resources can affect grading systems. This leads to a study of literature in relation to grading systems, its history, the reform of the letter grading system in educational context, the rights-based recognition of young people, and evaluation processes both at home and internationally.

In the context of Nepal, the review goes on to explore the need for a grading system in Nepal, the transition from traditional SLC examination system into a new grading framework, as well as challenges faced in practice. It includes review of the need for teachers' preparedness and disparities between urban and rural secondary schools. Furthermore, the impact of federalization on grading policy and implementation is also explored. The chapter concludes by describing the grading system's prospects and summarizing the chapter.

To conduct a thorough and evidence-based discussion for this literature review, I systematically evaluated the relevant literature. I researched the large educational research databases of ProQuest Education Database, Scopus, ERIC (Education Resources Information Centre), Web of Science, JSTOR, EBSCOhost Education Research Complete, Taylor and Francis online, SAGE journals, SpringerLink and Google Scholar to find studies relevant to my own topic. The search process involved combining keywords such as assessment practices, grading system, standards-based grading, students experiences, teachers' experiences, and perceptions of grading, using Boolean operators (AND/OR) to broaden and refine

the results. I also reassessed national policy documents and reports from the Ministry of Education, the Curriculum Development Centre (CDC), and the National Examination Board (NEB) to combine the Nepalese policy context. A structured narrative literature review was used for this research. The work is not a fully systematic review, but it has been undertaken systematically and transparently. Literature published between 2000 and 2025 relating to the relevant topics of student-teacher experiences of grading reform in Nepal were identified from academic databases using specific keyword search terms. Studies that were included within this literature review were those studies that were most relevant to the experience of grading reform in relation to both students and teachers. These criteria provided a framework for ensuring a broad but targeted engagement with all available literature, and for providing flexibility in methodology.

2.2 History of Grading

Different scholars have examined the history of grading. Their interpretations vary; however, grades were most likely assigned based on a variety of factors that were considered important at the time. Schneider and Hutt (2014) discovered evidence of students in elementary and secondary schools taking tests eight times a year and being graded on their performance. According to Schneider and Hutt (2014), grades can show information to students about their performance and act as a motivational tool, while avoiding the reinforcement of rivalry or excessive competition among them.

In the history of grading, the discussion has focused on the United States because it has one of the earliest and well-documented foundations of formal grading methods (Schneider and Hutt, 2014; Brookhart, 1994). Historical evidence shows that in 1785, Yale University located in New Haven, Connecticut, United States determined a system of student classification in college which ranked student accomplishment in Latin words such as Optimi and Perjores (Schinske and Tanner, 2014; Stiggins, 2001). Later in 1897, Mt. Holyoke College implemented one of the first modern-grading systems (A–F), which affected grading in modern colleges in the United States (Mount Holyoke College, 2023). Since these episodes in grading are so well recorded, it provides a clear and factual basis to identify the history of current grading systems, and how they have spread worldwide. A shift in the way students is assessed by their teachers, away from an evaluation based on numbers

toward one that uses letters and a student's grade point average (GPA), is occurring at present in Nepal. This shift occurred after the Curriculum Development Centre introduced this new form of evaluation into use (Curriculum Development Centre, 2022).

The first mention of a grading system in post-secondary education dates from the late 1700s. Yale had a system in place in 1785 that divided seniors into four groups: Optimi, second Optimi, Inferiors, and Perjures (Schinske and Tanner, 2014; Schneider and Hutt, 2014; Smallwood, 1935). This grading system was like that used at Cambridge University, where the founders of Yale University received their education (Schneider and Hutt, 2014).

Other types of grading systems emerged in the 1800s and were used at the post-secondary level. According to Smallwood (1935), this is roughly the time when grading began to shift from descriptive to numerical terms. Schools began to doubt the efficacy of public examinations shortly after, about 1825.

Smallwood (1935) examined those early public examinations in American universities and found them ineffective because they lacked the depth and period or duration needed to precisely measure students' capabilities or annual progress.

At this time, written examinations were not always an element of the procedure at some universities.

Throughout the rest of the nineteenth century, there is evidence of additional grading systems and schemes.

All the above grading schemes and adjustments created groundwork for grading in the twentieth century. Grades at the elementary, secondary, and post-secondary levels were a common part of education in the United States by the end of the Civil War (Schneider and Hutt, 2014). Because of the changing nature of schools in the twentieth century, grading became more crucial than ever.

With the beginning of compulsory attendance laws in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, high school enrolments intensified appreciably (Guskey, 2013). Grading developed increasingly instrumentally: by the early twentieth century, various stakeholders in the education system, including teachers, parents, admissions officers, administrators, and employers were using grades as indicators of academic ability and success (Schneider and Hutt, 2014). Simultaneously,

schools in the United States also commenced to make use of large-scale achievement testing programs (Stiggins, 2001).

Due to the varying meanings of grades among teachers and institutions, Schinske and Tanner (2014) underlined the necessity for uniformity in grading. Grades could not be used in the numerous ways that teachers desired if they did not have a clear knowledge of their significance. Even though this problem was detected in the early 1900s, it still exists to some level in the American educational system. Schools recognized the irregularities in grading at the time and tried their best to correct them so that teachers and other schools had a common understanding, but there was still a lot to be desired (Schneider and Hutt, 2014). The greater degree of grading uniformity, on the other hand, was appreciated byparentsatthetimesinceitsupplied them with consistent information about their children's learning (Schneider and Hutt, 2014). The data effectively allowed them to gain a basic grasp of their children's academic progress.

As the twentieth century began, percentage grades were widely used and began to become established in American classrooms (Schinske and Tanner, 2014). The change to percentage grades was gradual, and few U.S. instructors questioned the practice, Guskey (2013) wrote. The practice appeared to be a logical outgrowth of the increased expectations placed on high school instructors, who were now responsible for a larger number of students. Sincethen, percentage grades have been utilized in American schools, and they have been retained but not substantially evolved (O'Connor, 2009). Even though the % grade was widely employed, it did not always convert into high-quality education and learning. In fact, school dropout rates were three times greater in the early 1900s than they are now (Stiggins, 2001).

Some fresh observations concerning grading surfaced in the second decade of the twentieth century. Grading was determined to be incorrect in two separate experiments by Starch and Elliot in 1912 and 1913. Significant disparities in grading among professors of the same material were discovered in the investigations. When 142 different teachers assessed a Language Arts assessment, the range of scores was 55 percent to 98 percent, and when 138 different teachers graded a Mathematics assessment, the range of scores was 35 percent to 95 percent. Both analyses found severe flaws in the time's grading schemes, procedures, beliefs, and ideologies.

The practice of grading on the curve was one of the outcomes of these investigations (Schinske and Tanner, 2014). The normal curve, also known as the normal distribution, is a balanced, bell-shaped statistical distribution in which maximum values group near the mean and the probabilities match off evenly toward both extremes (Kulick and Wright, 2008). In educational settings, it is often assumed that student performance (or test scores) estimates this distribution, which causes practices like curving grades based on the bell curve model (Kulick and Wright, 2008). Because study on a population's intellectual aptitude revealed that IQ roughly resembled a normal curve, some thought it would be reasonable to assign grades within a classroom based on a normal curve (Schinske and Tanner, 2014). Moreover, grades at these levels would be assigned without regard to student achievement. Because this grading approach was defective in so many ways, teachers continued to look for ways to make grades signify the same thing regardless of the teacher or school (Schneider and Hutt, 2014).

Inconsistencies and obstacles in grading did not vanish with the start of a new decade. But grades were not going to be abandoned, no matter how onerous the hunt for objectivity, Schneider and Hutt (2014, p12) said of the sentiment in the 1920s. They were considered too effective as extrinsic motivation, even when such motivators were perceived to have grave repercussions. Even if improvement was required, grades performed a vital role. Stiggins (2001) went on to clarify further:

Since the 1950s and 1960s, when grades had begun to become more uniform, standardized examinations began to be used and considered as a criterion of quality in American schools (Stiggins, 2001). In institutions, grading volatility was felt in a variety of ways.

The multiple-choice evaluation became popular in the 1980s, following a trend that began in the 1940s (Brimi, 2011). These tests were utilized in a variety of settings, from classrooms to national assessments, and they were widely employed. Multiple-choice evaluation contains items in which students choose the correct answer from a set of alternative answers, allowing efficient, objective scoring and broad subject coverage (Haladyna, 2004). However, by strategy it tends to favour accurate recall and may struggle to probe complex reasoning or student thinking processes (Haladyna, 2004).

Another transition occurred in the 1980s, but this time it was of a different nature. The focus shifted from educating those who could fulfil educational requirements while ignoring those who could not ensure that all children learned and met certain basic expectations (O'Connor, 2009). Stiggins (2001) had a similar sentiment, stating that in the 1980s and 1990s, our culture began to require higher levels of competency for significant segments of students.

Performance-based and alternate assessments became popular shortly after, in the 1990s (Brimi, 2011). Alternative assessments refer to non-traditional evaluation methods. Such as portfolios, projects, and performances that highlight students' capacity to relate knowledge and reveal skills in reliable contexts rather than purely choosing from fixed options (Merritt, 2021).

This shift was significant because standards have increasingly influenced educational policy and practice, including expectations concerning educational leadership (Young et al., 2016). As Shepard, Hannaway, and Baker (2009) described the foundations for the movement were formed by the 1994 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which required the states to grow challenging and vital curriculum standards for all students, and required the taking of evaluation tests

designed to correlate with those standards to ascertain academic progress.

2.3 The Meaning of Grades

According to Wormeli (2006), grades should provide a clear and accurate representation of what a student understands and can do - mastery. He further claims that grades capture students' development and the teacher's instruction, provide feedback and information to parents, and assist teachers in making instructional decisions for the class and individual students. According to Wiliam (2011), grades could do three things: (a) give statistics on students to aid in decision-making, (b) inspire students, and (c) provide specific feedback regarding work or performance.

In the context of education, grades can be used as a noun or as a verb. As a noun, grade refers to a position on a continuum of quality, proficiency, value or intensity.

This scale can be used as numbers (such as 1 to 100), letters (e.g., A, B, C, D, E, F) or descriptive terms (e.g., exemplary, proficient, basic, below basic). The terms of assessment and grading are frequently used interchangeably. Assidere is a Latin derivation that means sitting beside (Wiggins, 1993). Classroom assessment is the act of gathering, synthesizing, and evaluating data in a classroom to assist a teacher in making decisions. Formative and summative evaluations are the two types of assessments used in the classroom. Therefore, both terms are explained below.

Formative assessment

Formative assessment refers to continuous processes used by teachers and students to record progress toward learning goals, measure what has been learned, and pinpoint areas of improvement (Boston, 2008). Formative assessments tend to be low stakes, highlighting feedback rather than grades, and allowing teachers to change teaching practices in real time (Wiliam, 2011).

Through methods such as classroom dialogue, quizzes, exit tickets, peer evaluation, and formative assessments, evidence of student understanding is provided (Poorvu Center, 2017). The key goal is not to grade students, but rather, to ensure scaffolding learning by showing both teachers and students their errors and deficits (Heritage, 2013). Used sensibly, formative assessment yields a continuous feedback loop, assisting students' self-regulation of learning processes, clarification of goals, and advising teachers of lesson modifications (WestEd, 2013).

As a verb, to grade means to place a student's performance on the continuum, based on a mix of subjective judgement and evidence (Anderson, 2018).

Summative assessment

Summative assessment is conducted at the end of a period of lessons (course, unit, semester) and is constructed to assess the performance of students against some standard or set of criteria (National Research Council, 2001). It tends to involve high-stakes assessments that conclude in grades, certificates, or promote/dismiss decisions about students (Poorvu Center, 2017).

Summative assessments contain final exams, term papers, standardized tests, project measures, or collections of assessments that generate a summary estimate of what has been learned by students (Harlen, 2012). As summative assessments are

retrospective, they are less beneficial for day-to-day adjustments to lessons (National Research Council, 2001). However, they ensure accountability, peer-review benchmarking, and legitimize learning processes to external stakeholders such as accreditation, administration, and policy-making bodies (Harlen, 2012). According to Guskey and Jung (2007), the goal of grades is to describe a student's degree of achievement of certain learning targets using a range of instruments and to communicate that information to stakeholders to guide improvements and celebrate triumphs. Grades, according to Wormeli (2006) and Winger (2005), should provide an accurate reflection of a student's knowledge of academic subject standards. Sadler (2010) agreed with Wormeli and Winger that grades should reflect an authentic depiction of a student's level of academic accomplishment, and that if a grade is to be trusted to communicate this achievement, then only achievement-related criteria should contribute to the grade. The grade is given to describe how successfully students have completed the learning objectives or goals assigned for a class or course of study described by Munoz and Guskey (2015).

Grades, as currently used, do not accurately reflect what students know and have learned (Schinske and Tanner, 2014). The cause of this may or may not be significant, but there may be one answer that explains the situation. There is a lot of data to support the notion that teachers receive little, if any, training in effective grading and reporting techniques (Guskey, 2006; Dhakal and Bhurtel, 2023).

Guskey (2009) argues that grading will continue to be a fundamentally subjective practice in which teachers' beliefs, values, backgrounds, philosophy of learning, and experience influence the establishment of grades. Teachers may subjectively inflate or deflate students' grades (Goswami and Mumit, 2018). Traditional grading practices consider certain aspects, which have an impact on grading. Along with all these aspects, the specific elements, the quantity of elements included in a grade, and the criteria used by teachers to generate a grade differ greatly from one teacher to the next, which influences student grades (Guskey, 2006).

Grading has been an element of the educational system all over the world. Grading is one of the most basic features of American education, Schneider and Hutt (2014) remarked (p. 1). The first indication of student grading in the K-12 school system - which refers to formal education from kindergarten through 12 grades, typically children from ages 5 to 18 - dates back approximately from around 200 years. In

the early to mid- 1800s, students in elementary and secondary schools began to receive grades (Schneider and Hutt, 2014).

Marzano (2000) & Vatterott (2015) agree that one of the earliest academic institutions use a four-point grade scale, with 1-4 representing different levels of student success; this was the foundation for the modern four-point GPA.

This novelty marked a shift from narrative measures to a more standardised, quantitative approach to estimating student performance. (a precursor of the four-point grade point average) to provide feedback to students. Similarly, other colleges began to transition away from storytelling approaches and toward more quantitative ways over time (Marzano, 2000, p. 11), indicating the complexity of grading process, Zulaiha (2017) found the difficulties of the grading process, advising that while assignment of grades may seem minimal, it is a multifaceted process that is significant to students. Over the years reformers in education found weaknesses occurring in the grading process then promoted major reformational measures in these grading systems to accomplish greater uniformity and meaning in assessment (Reeves et al., 2017). These reformers often struggled to determine how to bring about needed large-scale reforms. Some parents and board members alike questioned the propriety in changing useless grading traditions and asked these reformers to be cautious in adopting changes or entirely discontinuing the proposed changes (Buekmiller and Peters, 2014; Reeves, 2011).

Anderson (2018) questioned why students should be graded, arguing that grades have caused considerable uncertainty. According to Clayton and Shores (2015), the primary reason for instructors' award grades is to inform students and stakeholders about the student's current level of achievement/learning. O'Connor et al. (2018) determined that for these grades to be fair, meaningful, and accurate, schools must have clear and approved policies regarding the purpose of grading.

When considering the necessity for a workable grading policy, Anderson agreed with Clayton and Shores on the importance of communication and focused on three audiences: teachers, policymakers, and the media. Anderson (2018) concluded that percentages and letter grades do not always effectively reflect a student's progress as they are often inconsistent and lack standardization. He argues that grades are subjective and vary depending on the teacher's expectations and criteria. Grading systems have been complicated and conflicting, causing consternation among

teachers and policymakers alike (Lamarino, 2014). Anderson (2018), for example, when discussing the role of policymakers, referenced a controversial adjustment made by the South Carolina State Board of Education, which substituted a 10-point system for letter grades (A = 90-100, B = 80-89) with a 7-point scale (A = 93-100, B = 85-92). Policymakers believed that this modification would benefit students, especially by helping transfer students from other states with different grading systems improve their eligibility for scholarships. Language made it harder for individual school districts to enact policies like the no-zero grading policy. That policy advises teachers not to record grades below 50% for attempted work, meaning students cannot receive a grade below 50% (Anderson, 2018).

Post (2017) suggested that policy talks should be open, honest, and practical, and that grading issues should be discussed to improve the educational system and achieve excellence. According to Brookhart et al. (2016), grading variability is difficult to remove. To uncover the critical causes of poor grading judgments, the recommendations proposed looking into grading in terms of teachers' instruction and evaluation (Brookhart et al., 2016). The second suggestion was that grading systems should demonstrate integrity and be perceived as fair by all participants (Anderson, 2018). Grades have long been considered inaccurate and unfair because they fail to effectively communicate student learning (Anderson, 2018; Schinske and Tanner, 2014).

2.4 Grading Purpose

The most effective grading practices provide accurate, specific, and timely feedback to teachers and students to help them improve their instruction and performance (Marzano, 2000). Grading has three primary aims, according to Tomlinson and Moon (2013). The primary purpose of grading should be to inform students and parents about where they stand academically. Second, the information given and the method of communication must be clear to achieve that goal. Finally, the grading process and the assignment of student grades are distinct from the goal-oriented approach of giving students feedback and having teachers use that input to guide their education. Additional purposes include (1) ranking students, (2) motivating or punishing students, (3) grouping, sorting, or placing students in classes; (4) providing teachers with information for instructional planning; and

(5) teacher and program evaluation, according to Tomlinson and Moon (2013).

Grades are used as a tool to motivate students to work harder to achieve them. Historically, grading systems encourage competition among students, enhancing their drive for improvement. Chamberlin, Yasué, and Chiang (2018) found that grades may act as extrinsic motivators, encouraging students to apply themselves to their academic work, but that reliance on grades may also lessen intrinsic motivation. Anderson (2018) shows that grades can motivate high-achieving students but can also foster extrinsic motivation and anxiety, which may lead them to avoid challenging tasks.

Feldmesser et al. (2016) explain that most students see grades as a positive indicator of their achievement, and some students work hard to avoid the penalties of poor marks. Finally, the grading process and the assignment of student grades are distinct from the goal-oriented approach of giving students feedback and having teachers use that input to guide their education. Similarly, Self-Determination Theory suggests that extrinsic motivators such as grades and recognition can play a significant role in sustaining effort, particularly when intrinsic motivation is low (Deci and Ryan, 1985). The Self- Determination Theory (SDT) claims that humans have three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which can lead to more self-determined forms of motivation (Bureau et al., 2021). When intrinsic motivation is depleted, external motivators (such as rewards, such as grades) can result in action and determination (Howard et al., 2020). Empirical evidence from meta-analyses indicates that interventions based on SDT tend to improve students' intrinsic motivation, autonomy, and competence (Howard et al., 2020). Thus, SDT supplies strong academic rationale for why grades remain important in educational settings, despite students regulating intrinsic interest.

Another important purpose of grading is to provide students with feedback and to inform teachers about students' strengths and weaknesses. Anderson (2018) highlighted those teachers can adjust their instruction based on students' grades. He argues that traditional grades fail to provide actionable feedback because they offer limited, unstandardized information to teachers.

Shute (2008) described feedback as information provided to learners to influence some adjustment in their reasoning or behaviour to promote learning. Marzano (2000) highlighted that one of the most significant reasons for marking is to support worthwhile responses for both students and parents. Similarly, Reeves (2008) said

that constructive marking practices should provide feedback that is precise, specific, and timely, to enhance student performance. It is common in high-quality classrooms for grades to be measured merely one of the various types of feedback that support students' academic growth. Glasgow and Hicks (2003) highlighted that feedback serves important, multifaceted purposes for students. Feedback helps them evaluate the degree of their grasp of course content, the efficiency or effectiveness of the strategies employed to achieve the grade, and the connection between students' attentiveness and their academic success. Heflebower et al. (2014) emphasise that grading systems risk not being valid, just, and reliable unless grades accurately represent what students do know and can do.

Tomlinson and Moon (2013) pointed out that grades should provide students and their parents with a clear and precise indicator of academic progress, signifying the effort on the part of the teacher to support learners as far as possible from their previous initiatives because of their varied readiness levels, interests, and approaches to learning. They went on to say that grades are intended to enhance learning, which is principal in the educational process. Marzano (2000) believed academic achievement should take priority as the most important consideration in grading.

Moreover, grades may serve as a channel of communication that conveys information about students' degree of academic achievement to a variety of stakeholders: students, parents, teachers, colleges, employers, and policymakers (Anderson, 2018). Elikai and Schuhmann (2010) equally considered grades as communication involving the academic achievement of students. Stiggins (2001), building on the concept, suggested that grades should empower students to learn and undertake responsibility for their own degree of success. Finally, O'Connor (2009) emphasised that the key function of grades should be meaningful communication about the degree of accomplishment of all concerned students (parents and professionals alike, including learners, parents, teachers, employers, and higher education) for the benefit of stakeholders.

Grades indicate varying levels of student performance using symbols or numbers. Grading serves different purposes, including communicating with parents about their children's academic performance, encouraging students to engage in self-evaluation, providing guidance on academic pathways, enhancing learning effectiveness, and supporting students' sense of responsibility (Guskey, 2009). Performance-based assessment, in contrast to traditional testing, requires students to apply their knowledge by completing real-world tasks or producing a product that demonstrates competence in context, thereby revealing deeper understanding (Myers, 2021).

2.5 Different Types of Grading System

This section examines different types of grading systems. Number crunching has been part of teachers' lives since the introduction of grades (O'Connor, 2009). Furthermore, traditional grading practices frequently include non-academic variables such as effort or work habits, class engagement, attendance, and demeanour.

Traditionally, teachers have gathered evidence using various assessment methods and categorised their grade books by evidence types such as tests, projects, and assignments, according to O'Connor (2009b). When students are ranked against each other, they often prioritise surpassing their peers rather than developing a deeper understanding of the subject matter (Schinske and Tanner, 2014). Traditional grades have little to do with learning because they are competitive, punitive, and encourage game-playing by students and instructors alike, writes O'Connor (2009). They emphasise shaming rather than learning and are frequently employed as punishments. Because the difficulties they are facing now may be obsolete in the years ahead, grading must support learning and provide students with the knowledge and skills necessary for their future learning.

Many traditional educational techniques, such as rote learning and the use of grades as rewards and punishments, have hampered, if not prevented, students' development of these critical abilities and dispositions (Vatterott, 2015, p. 25). In the traditional grading system, grades were also considered a means of punishment: If you forget your book, you'll lose 10 points; if your assignment is a day late, you'll lose 50 points; if you talk in class, you'll get a zero for the day; and if you're late,

you'll lose 5 points. Because grades are meant to punish students for bad behaviour, they tend to eclipse the grades they obtain for learning. (Vatterott, p. 34, 2015)

According to research, teachers' appropriate feedback is a crucial element of the learning process. Non-academic factors that interfere with the grading process negatively impact teaching, learning, and grading. The nature of effective feedback is specific and formative (Marzano, 2003 p. 39).

The traditional grading system has been linked to anxiety and societal pressure due to its rigid pass/fail nature. Ali, Amin and Shahzaib (2023) and Zayanb et al. (2025) found that the traditional pass/fail exam has been linked to phobias, increased dropout intentions, and even suicidal situations among students. The traditional method of sorting and ranking creates a level of competitiveness among students that prevents them from cooperating in their pursuit of knowledge and learning.

The traditional grading systems, widely used for decades across the world, use letter grades or percentage scores. The traditional system has been criticized for lacking clarity in what grades measure. The standard-based grading system has been emerged in response to limitations of traditional grading system in which the student performance is evaluated by comparing it to clearly defined learning objectives or standards, often by using descriptive scales. This section discusses the challenges associated with traditional grading and further explores the benefits of standard-based grading systems.

2.5.1. Traditional Grading System

Traditional grading refers to the practice of using points, percentages, and letter grades to assess student learning (Anderson, 2018). The purpose of grades was to communicate student progress to parents, students, teachers, postsecondary institutions, and bosses (Anderson, 2018). While the origins of traditional grading systems are debated, it can be traced back to Harvard University in 1646, where the students were required to complete the exit exams before receiving degrees (Schinske and Tanner, 2014).

A student would obtain a letter grade in every single subject during each grading period in a traditional grading system. The letter grade was calculated as the average of the student's scores over the grading period, incorporating both academic and non-academic elements (Townsley and Varga, 2018). This combination made it

challenging to recognise a student's genuine capability in the content area (Clayton and Shores, 2015). Randall and Engelhard's (as mentioned in Zulaiha, 2017) findings supported this concern by showing that teachers sometimes used non-achievement features to modify borderline grades, suggesting that grades may not always reflect actual academic performance.

The most common grading techniques involve some type of calculation. Total points, averaging, letter grades, grading on the curve, and grade point average are just a few of the methods teachers use to establish student grades, many of which involve some math. These systems are well-established in American classrooms and are extensively used.

2.5.2 Challenges of the Traditional Grading System

Under traditional grading systems, teachers employ a variety of methodologies, including averaging, total points, percentages, and letter grades to summarise student performance. Additionally, a combination of these tactics is frequently employed. All have been used for a long time and hence have credibility, yet they all have severe flaws (Marzano, 2000, p. 86). While these methods have a long-standing presence in education and may appear precise, they are increasingly criticized for masking the actual progress of students. Teachers make the mistake of assuming that since they perform some sort of mathematical computation on the grades that students have acquired, the grade has a high level of precision (Marzano, 2000).

Traditional grading practices are increasingly being questioned by teachers for a variety of reasons, including practices that were developed to categorize students rather than facilitate learning (Anoita et al., 2020). The objective of traditional grading is to sort, select, and justify. It's questionable whether the methods used to rank order or sort are based on intellectual capacity. After all, the differing character of instructor grades has already been acknowledged. To put it another way, when different teachers grade the identical piece of work, the difference in grades might be rather large (O'Connor, 2009b). The findings challenge the reliability of teacher-assigned grades, and it reflects the subjective nature of the grading system (Anderson, 2018).

Iamarino (2014) further supports the concept of complex calculations equivalent to precise grades, saying: "The focus of point-based grading is on numbers rather than

Conversations".Final grades are derived from grade book data (points), and there is sometimes no comprehensive procedure in place to verify the accuracy of the methods used to obtain those statistics. As a result, determining whether the final grades are true reflections of student skill levels is difficult.

Letter grades can be very effective transmitters of student knowledge, but how they are assigned is crucial to their success. Letter grades, in the absence of further information, are erroneous and deceptive, according to Reeves (2011, p. 78). Traditional letter grades, according to a National School Boards Association staffer, have no real value and may eventually be phased out (Pal, 2022).

Guskey (2013) established that most scales of grading are unequally distributed, whereas some 30 to 40 levels are positioned in passing grades and approximately 60 to 70 levels are categorized in failure grades. Most of the grading measurement is thus given to failure grades, while a small portion is allocated to passing grades.

As such, a lack of balance may occur when an excessive amount of weight is placed upon failure versus success in the grading process. This could possibly provide some explanation for why failing grades have been prominent in the record books of students. Also, this issue can potentially be exacerbated by existing deficiencies in the way that most schools currently use grading practices. Therefore, it would seem prudent to utilize student assessment through clear and fair methods that will enable teachers to effectively communicate their students' level of achievement. Regardless of if letter grades, percentages, averages, or point systems are utilized, there should be greater emphasis placed upon providing a means of communication regarding students' achievements; rather than creating undue emphasis on failures.

No matter how well the grading process is presented to students and their parents, the result is a jumble of chores and assignments that is at best perplexing and, at worst, rarely reflects genuine learning and knowledge (Guskey, 2006). The greater precision of percentage grading is genuinely considerably more fictitious than real, Guskey (2013, p.4) explained.

Another challenge of the traditional grading system is the aggregation of diverse learning elements such as content mastery, effort, participation, punctuality as well as behaviour into a single grade. Guskey (2011) argues that to combining height, weight, diet and exercise into a single numeric score to describe physical health which would be unscientific.

The traditional grading practice that warrants further consideration is how homework affects a grade. Homework provides an opportunity for students to practice and master a skill and is thus an important part of the learning process (Ellekai and Schuhmann, 2010). The two issues surrounding homework are whether it should be graded and what to do when students do not finish it. Both issues are intertwined. Most people in education assume that incomplete homework is due to laziness or a lack of effort on the student's behalf (Dueck, 2014).

2.5.3 Standards-Based Grading System

Standards-Based Grading (SBG) is an approach to grading that focuses on measuring learning in relation to clearly defined learning objectives or standards, rather than assigning grades based on a cumulative average of various tasks. Standards-based grading compares student performance to defined levels of proficiency in knowledge, understanding, and abilities, according to McMillan (as cited in Tierney et al., 2011). In theory, standards-based grading is more equitable because students' accomplishments are more precisely reported relative to learning standards (Tierney et al., 2011, p. 211). This helps to create a more transparent and equitable grading system that reflects actual student achievement. Even though evidence suggests that standards-based grading has benefited, grading reform presents obstacles and issues that have confounded teachers for years.

Standards-based grading is seen by Miller (2013) as a more student-centred approach. It is critical for teachers to recognize their students' strengths and needs, as well as to act on what they know about their students' academic performance. If a teacher assigns students to write an essay, the assignment may need to be amended based on individual student performance during the essay writing process. While some students may require coaching on how to successfully present and support concepts, others may have no organizational flaws but require the ability to change from exposition to narrative mode to breathe life into staid language. Another student may need to abandon an essay that isn't working and try something different, which may jeopardize his ability to complete the project on time with the rest of the class. According to Miller (2013, p. 112), standards-based grading not only aligns teaching practice with standards, but it also allows students and teachers to get individualised education.

O'Connor (2011) outlines several strategies to support the transition to SBG which include, fixing practices that distort achievement, such as grading based on behaviour; improving the quality of evidence by using valid and reliable assessments; changing grade calculations such as eliminating the use of averages that penalize early mistakes; and designing systems that support further learning.

2.5.4 Benefits of the Standards-Based Grading System (SBG)

SBG offers an alternative to traditional grading practices by aligning students' performance to learning objectives or standards. SBG focuses on students' mastery of content, assessed through formative and summative assessments that reflect academic standards (O'Connor, 2011). This leads to benefits for various stakeholders: first, the students; second, teachers; and third, parents.

One of the primary benefits of SBG is its ability to reflect students' achievement in relation to well-defined standards (Tierney et al., 2011). Clarity improves the feedback process and improves instructional planning for teachers, which is critical for improving student learning (Black and Wiliam, 1998).

When students are given the opportunity to succeed and are given clear expectations; they frequently achieve at or near their full ability (Wormeli, 2006).

Pacharn, Bay and Felton (2013) highlight that SBG helps to improve students' motivation by shifting the focus from earning points to deeper understanding of the subject matter. As students are evaluated on consistent performance rather than early mistakes, students tend to focus on deeper learning. SBG also encourages a growth mindset by encouraging that learning is a process and they are evaluated on their final level of mastery rather than early failures (Glasgow and Hicks, 2003). In SBG, students receive proper actionable feedback which contributes to consistent engagement and greater learning (Dueck, 2014).

Furthermore, a school's capacity to run efficiently and effectively is mainly dependent on its ability to offer high-quality, reliable information about student learning and achievement (Stiggins, 2001). The culture of a school is also important to its overall success, and SBG has been shown to have a good impact on it (Heflebower et al., 2014). Schools with a positive culture may do everything it takes to succeed, even if it means making painful changes (Scriffiny, 2008). Grading is a high-leverage method that, when correctly executed, will assist every other element

of the system to improve, according to Reeves (2011). When student failures decrease, student behaviour improves, teacher morale improves, resources committed to remedial courses and course repetitions drop, and resources invested in electives and advanced courses increase, wrote Reeves (2008). When teachers adopt tactics to minimise stress and foster a pleasant emotional environment, students develop emotional resilience and learn more effectively and at higher levels of cognition, Willis (2006) explains. Teachers can use SBG to better understand their students' needs, enabling them to employ their most effective and efficient teaching strategies to increase student achievement (Scriffiny, 2008). The best teachers understand that it is their obligation to assist students in realising and/or exceeding their full potential (Whitaker, 2004).

Another reason schools should explore SBG is that, in an SBG setting, students can learn at their own pace and make mistakes that help them learn. Pacharn, Bay, and Felton (2013) found in their study that flexibility in grading structures positively influences students' motivation and engagement. Studies have indicated that students benefit more from learning about when they are incorrect than when they are correct, Glasgow and Hicks (2003) said. Students are more likely to develop suitable ways to correct their faults if they understand why something is wrong. When students feel they can learn well, they are better equipped to really do so, according to Dueck (2014), whereas those who are resigned to failure will likely have their pessimism confirmed.

Finally, individuals who have used an SBG strategy have reported that it has reduced their workload (Scriffiny, 2008). Grading often takes up a lot of time for teachers, and it has even been blamed for bad instructional techniques (Schinske and Tanner, 2014).

The expectations, time, and stress associated with grading may be diverting instructors from integrating other pedagogical methods that could promote a more positive and productive classroom environment for learning, said Schinske and Tanner (2014, p. 163). Teachers would have more time to focus on becoming the best teacher they can be because an SBG method saves time in the grading process. Dueck (2014) highlights that the grades in SBG focus on pedagogical strategies rather than compliance monitoring.

2.5.5 Educational Assessment: Summative and Formative Assessments

Educational assessment refers to systematic gathering of information to make decisions about individuals related to their academic performance which can include a range of procedures for measurement and testing, but it is not restricted to these forms (Lynch, 2001). The assessment functions encompass various tools and processes used to make informed decisions about individuals and educational programs. The assessment models play an important role in evaluating the students' performance. On the other hand, they also provide an indicator of effectiveness of teaching methods and overall teaching curriculum.

Educational assessment can be broadly divided into two types: Summative Assessment and Formative Assessment. Firstly, summative assessment refers to the type of assessment conducted for determining the current level of achievement of students against the predefined curriculum learning outcomes (SEAMEO, 2012). Tan (2012) shares that the summative assessment is primarily used to measure the extent and nature of what students have learned. The assessment under summative assessment is generally conducted at certain intervals such as academic year or semester. These assessment methods can include exams, standardized tests, and projects. They are often high-stakes decisions such as certifications, promotions, selection for scholarships, and school placement (Centre for Assessment, 2007).

On the other hand, formative assessment includes an ongoing process of continuous feedback to both students and teachers. Wiliam (2011) defines formative assessment as any assessment for which the priority in design and practice is to serve the purpose of enhancing students' learning. The formative assessments take various forms in the classroom and are diverse as individual teaching styles. The primary goal of formative assessment is not to assign grades but to identify learning gaps and provide feedback to help improve students' understanding. The formative assessment can include various strategies such as peer feedback, discussions, and self-assessments, which promote learner engagement and individualized instruction (Looney, 2005).

2.6 Different Countries' Grading Experiences

In this section, I examine the grading experiences of schooling systems in different parts of the world that have undergone important reforms and transformations in assessment and have also made substantial contributions to the philosophy of

assessment. The system of formal grading was initially put into practice in countries like the United States and United Kingdom, so these examples are important because they give us a historical background for understanding progressive improvements in the context of grading, and in the assessment which follows (Schneider and Hutt, 2013). Countries in Asia and most of Africa later implemented grading systems like these through the colonial legacy or through educational amendments after independence. This part is consequently divided into two sections: first, those dealing with the countries that have given us the grading philosophy and grading policies, this second, the systems of grading which have been feasible and modified for use and obtainable in numerous forms in such countries as India, Pakistan, Ethiopia and Jordan and I have chosen these countries for the purpose that they are preferably representative of strong educational schemes which are driving through change significance to the grades, the evaluations and the continuous correlation of subjects in grading, thus their best approaches and systems are respected cases of benchmark offered for consideration in studying up the varying policies in the arriving at the grading system for Nepal (OECD, 2018). Their lessons are lessons of immediate and important qualifications as to how the ideas of policy may be successfully translated into the actual practice of the school room activities. Countries like for instance India (CBSE) and Singapore also have similarities regionally, culturally and structurally with Nepal, so it is a case of these well-conceived ideas being adaptable to the well desired educational practices of Nepal. Moreover, these nations regularly participate in international assessments and educational benchmarking, confirming that their grading reforms are well-documented and grant a strong basis for comparison.

2.6.2 Grading experience in High-Performing Systems

The grading systems in developed countries have moved from rigid, summative assessments to more flexible, formative, and continuous assessment models. Systems like the UK's General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), India's Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), and Hong Kong's Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (HKDSE) uses formative assessments, differentiated student-centric instruction and project-based learning systems (CBSE, 2024).

US schools have already begun incorporating standards-based and competency-based models (Reeves, 2011). This is primarily focused on addressing issues relating to grade inflation, inequality, and lack of clarity. Similar cases can be found in Finland, which has shifted towards feedback and formative assessment in primary and lower secondary education (Sahlberg, 2015).

The Canadian education systems have developed a new type of system based upon standards to provide for an assessment of each student as to how well he/she has learned by identifying what the student still needs to learn, and through providing support for self-assessment and goal setting.

This method supports continuous improvement rather than labelling students because of any numerical digits (Liu, 2015).

Standards-referenced grading system is adopted widely by schools in Australia. Students are graded on how they demonstrate the understanding in cross-curricular context and how they respond in real-world scenarios. The students are graded based on mix of class participation, presentations, projects which encourage continuous learning and holistic evaluation (Macgill, 2022).

Singapore, which is known for high-stakes academic environment, in recent years has removed mid-years exams for primary and secondary schools from 2023. The education system now has placed greater emphasis on formative assessment, teacher feedback and character development which helps to mitigate students' academic stress, foster their all-round development, decrease teacher workload, and enhance parent-child relations (Hongyan, 2023).

Japan utilizes a highly structured but evolving grading culture where classroom performance, moral education, and participation are used as grading rubrics. The education system and grading practices involve project work, discipline, and long-term performance tracking to foster creativity and reduce exam pressure on younger students (Monbukagakusho, 2006).

In the 1960s, norm-referenced grading system was introduced by Sweden which was aimed at producing learning outcomes which are both quantifiable and measurable (Wikström, 2006). However, this model faced significant criticism as educational philosophies evolved towards more individualized and inclusive learning approaches. The norm-referenced assessment ranked the students against

each other and did not adequately support learning and educational growth. As a result, it was later replaced with a criterion-referenced grading model which evaluates the students against predefined standards rather than relative performance.

New Zealand has also experienced similar shifts, transitioning from norm-referenced to criterion-referenced assessment models. The assessment system was restructured to ensure alignment with learning objectives and contemporary pedagogical priorities (Crooks, 1988). Rather than traditional exams, these models used assessment methods, such as portfolios and performance-based tasks, to evaluate a broader range of student skills.

2.6.3 Grading Practices in Emerging Education Systems

Since the late 1700s, instructors have been tasked with assessing student success using a grading system (Postman, 1992). The purpose of grades is to indicate the level of achievement connected to Itha learning experience. Each grading system was investigated to establish the system's major characteristics and how student performance was ultimately rated (Carberry, 2018). Academic institutions in both rich and developing countries have taken seriously the grading system in education.

Most developing country governments modified their educational institutions soon after independence to fit them with new national goals. Many developing countries began to use this new method and reported varying results. Various universities, colleges, and schools around the world have practiced and adopted grading systems. In the same way, the SAARC countries of India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Nepal have implemented a grading system in their schools and colleges.

With the implementation of a grading system in the 2009-10 academic year, the Indian education system took a step toward revitalization emphasizing the students' perspectives on the grading system. According to Patel (2013), the grading system treats students as individuals and guides them based on their distinct talents and abilities. Furthermore, the grading system motivates students to excel in areas where they thrive. Since the grading method reduced unhealthy competition among students, children have experienced less stress and strain. His key point is that the grading system encourages students to develop their abilities while also reducing stress.

The primary motive for establishing grading systems in India was to alleviate students' examination-related stress. The student's ability is examined not only on academic performance but also on other activities such as internal assignments, classroom projects, and answering abilities in the grading system. This aids in the shaping of students and makes studying less monotonous. The grading system in India was implemented not just to match the international range of grades, but also to relieve students of some of their responsibilities. While the old percentage system concentrated on quantity, the results received through the grading system are based on the student's ability to comprehend the concepts (Patel, 2013). In countries such as China and India, such exam systems have been associated with heightened levels of anxiety, depression, and, in extreme cases, suicidal ideation among students (Chung and Park, 2024; Fu, 2024). According to statistics, every day in India, more than 17 students aged 15 to 25 commit suicides because of poor performance in an examination or an entrance test. One thing to consider is society's mindset, which places a lot of pressure on students to perform (Patel, 2013).

Majumder (2015) discovered that teachers and students have a positive opinion about the grading system. Teachers are more positive about the grading system than students. According to his research, the grading system makes individuals feel more at ease during examinations. Because the students are divided into separate grading scales, they may see their own faults and strengths. This not only helps teachers to concentrate more on average and below-average students, but it also allows students to work on their areas of weakness.

Hussain et al. (2014) found that high-performing students in college perform well regardless of the grading system, but low-performing students do better under tougher grading systems in a case study of the influence of grading policy on students at engineering colleges in Pakistan. As a result, the grading system is more important for low-performing students and it aids them in improving their learning abilities. Many educational institutions in Pakistan have switched from a standard letter grading system to a plus/minus grading system (Elikai and Schuhmann, 2010). The plus/minus grading system is stricter than the traditional grading system because students on the lower margin of a grade category have a greater possibility of losing their better mark due to the plus/minus grading system's increased resolution.

In their investigation of the effectiveness of Dilla University's grading system, Krishna and Korath (2015) found that the existing system is not benefiting students and that students are dissatisfied with it and want it changed. In his research, he found that 85 per cent of students want the university's current grading system changed.

Jordan, a developing country, has undergone significant transformation in its higher education system. A National Conference on Higher Education was organised in 2010 to develop a national strategy to strengthen and improve the higher education system. A recommendation for employing diverse and innovative evaluation methods to assess student learning was one of the primary aspects of this plan. According to Alquraan (2012), Jordanian university faculty members do not use a variety of assessment methodologies to evaluate students' learning.

As a result, it is suggested that additional research be done on the assessment methods used to measure learning in Jordanian universities, as well as the reasons behind the lack of a variety of assessment methods to assess learning. Furthermore, Jordanian higher education institutions should encourage faculty members to use a variety of evaluation methodologies to assess learning to obtain a variety of data about students. The next section will focus specifically on the South Asia region (India and Pakistan) with an emphasis on those countries that are neighbouring Nepal and have similar emerging education systems.

2.6.1 Grading Reform in South Asia- Learning from India and Pakistan

In South Asia, India and Pakistan are Nepal's two largest and closest neighbours, both culturally and educationally influential. In the context of this research, India is even more relevant since it introduced a national grading reform through the Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) system in 2009. In the same respect, Pakistan's experience of educational reform, is different in structure, but holds high relevance in relation to the political instability, equity and many other aspects. Regional variations in experience can also be viewed through the lens of Urban Bias as this concept allows us to analyse how Educational Reforms are affected by differences in rural and urban context urban bias's (Chambers, 1983).

2.6.3 Urban Bias and Educational Reform: The Lenses of Robert Chambers

Robert Chamber's theoretical framework of urban bias and 'putting the last first' (Chambers, 1983), provides a strong sense of understanding reflecting why

educational reforms in South Asia are not effectively working and are not being able to serve the most needed. Robert Chambers is renowned and influential development thinker of the twentieth century, who revealed the bitter reality that researchers and policymakers understand poverty, participation, and the relationship between knowledge and power in South Asia. His book, Rural Development: Putting the Last First (Chambers, 1983), introduced the concept of 'urban bias' and highlighted the priorities, perspectives, and interests of urban, educated, and powerful groups to dominate the design and implementation of policies. Chambers (1983) argued that the available resources are allocated to urban areas, but most of the population lives in rural areas.

Beyond the physical resources Chambers argue that the ones who formulated the policies to the rural area, they designed policy from the urban area with the limited understanding of the rural environment. Even though their intention for the rural area is positive, limited knowledge-based policy ultimately fails. Chamber ideas have huge implications for studying as well. The SEE grading reform was designed and drawn at central level by policymakers, curriculum developers, and education officials who are urban-educated and powerful people who are distant from the rural communities supporting. Thus, the findings from Research shows that educational policy decisions in Nepal are often developed at the centralized level with limited participation from local communities and rural stakeholders (Dhakal,2019; Edwards, 2011; Regmi, 2023).

Some statistical data reinforce this picture. Nepal's fourth Living Standards Survey (2022–23) found that substantial share of government education expenditure goes to urban areas (Devkota et al., 2021). Furthermore, despite increasing government investment in education, rising from 3.5% of GDP in 2007 to 5.5% in 2017, rural areas continue to experience significant disadvantages in educational infrastructure, teacher quality, and access to learning resources (World Bank, 2017; Devkota *et al*., 2021).

Chambers' later work, Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last (1997) a question is much applicable to this study: whose understanding of the SEE reform has shaped how it is designed, implemented, and evaluated? The answer is clear, in Nepal as other developing countries, policymakers, national curriculum developers,

and international development partners are involved and the voices of students, teachers, and rural communities have been affected by the reform.

2.6.4 India's Experience of Grading Reform

Similarly, India first introduced a national grading reform to its secondary education system in 2009 through the Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) system. It was introduced by the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) in accordance with the Right to Education Act (RTE Act) of 2009. As Nepal replaced the 'Iron Gate' of the SLC by replacing percentage-based marks with a letter grading system, India did it through the CCE to move away from a single make-or-break examination toward a system that assessed the whole child, continuously, across the full academic year (Kannan and Naidu, 2022).

Under the CCE framework, the marks obtained by students in Classes 9 and 10 were replaced by grades on a nine-point scale as follows: A+, A, B, C, D, and E. Student performance evaluated through a combination of formative assessments throughout the year and summative at the end of each term (CBSE, 2009).

As in Nepal, in India as well reforms took place with the realisation that the existing examination system has created excessive stress, encouraged rote memorisation, utilize the full range of student capabilities. The following table shows the brief of India's and Nepal's education reforms.

Year introduced	2009 (CBSE)	2016 (NEB)
Philosophical rationale	Reduce exam stress; holistic assessment; no detention policy (CBSE, 2009)	Replace 'Iron Gate' SLC; reduce psychological pressure; continuous learning (Government of Nepal, 2016; NEB, 2020)
Assessment structure	Formative (40%) + Summative (60%); two terms per year (CBSE, 2009)	Internal assessment (practical exams in some subjects (25%) + external examination (75%) (NEB, 2020)
Grading scale	9-point: A+ to E (later revised) (CBSE, 2009)	8-point: A+ to NG (revised from 9-point in 2021) (NEB, 2021)
Failed grade designation	E grade (later revised) (CBSE, 2009)	NG (Not Graded)- introduced 2021 (NEB, 2021)
Key legislation	Right to Education Act, 2009 (Government of India, 2009)	Education Act, 2016 (8th Amendment) (Government of Nepal, 2016)
Administered by	CBSE (central) + state boards (CBSE, 2009)	National Examination Board (NEB) (NEB, 2020)
Revised/rolled back?	CCE formally revised in 2017; Board exams reinstated (CBSE, 2017)	Ongoing; system revised 2021; debates continue (NEB, 2021)
Rural-urban equity concerns	Persistent; rural government schools are significantly disadvantaged (UNESCO, 2023; World Bank, 2024)	Persistent; rural public schools significantly disadvantaged (UNICEF, 2023; World Bank, 2024)
Teacher preparation	Insufficient; widespread implementation challenges reported (UNESCO, 2023)	Insufficient; limited orientation documented in this study

Table 4: SEE compared to CBSE

Sources: *Compiled by the author from Government of Nepal (2016), CBSE (2009), Government of India (2020), NEB (2020), UNESCO (2023), World Bank (2024), UNICEF (2023).*

India's decade-long experience with the educational reforms provides valuable lessons for Nepal, presenting both existing challenges and opportunities. On the positive side, the CCE succeeded in reducing the psychological pressure associated with a single-exam system, which aligns directly with the spirit of Nepal's SEE reform.

However, a study conducted in India revealed that the CCE had no significant effects on student test scores. Yagnamurthy (2017) specifically examines the CBSE's CCE school-based assessment reform, including its policy and implementation framework. The study found conceptual differences between the philosophy behind the reform and its implementation, which created confusion, and argued for greater flexibility, decentralised assessment decision-making and continuous engagement with teachers. The study highlighted that the lack of impact was due to the program's focus on evaluation without linking it to changes in teaching practices. This finding has direct implications for Nepal, where my study also found that teachers have limited understanding of the grading system, and it has raised serious questions about whether the SEE reform has changed what happens in classrooms.

In India, teachers also reported the administrative burden imposed by the CCE. A study by Naidu (2022) found that the most consistent complaint about the CCE was paperwork and an excessive workload. This concern also aligns with the findings of my study, in which teachers have expressed frustration with the implementation challenges of the SEE reform and the gap between the intended and practical applications.

In India, with the revision of the CCE in 2017, there was another policy departure in 2020 with the introduction of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. This reform has continued the spirit of the CCE through its emphasis on competency-based assessment and the introduction of a Holistic Progress Card (Naidu, 2022).

Evaluating a study from Agrawal (2014) the viewpoint of students, teachers, and experts revealed that teachers agreed that a similar assessment approach in all contributes the inequality between rural and urban students in quality of education. This finding is also very similar to my study, which also highlights the rural-urban disparities in educational outcomes which teachers have revealed.

The policy departures in India's ongoing journey from the CCE to the NEP 2020 indicate that educational reforms, particularly grading reform are not a one-time event but a continuous process of refinement. In case of Nepal, it is still in the relatively early stages of this journey, and the lesson from India is valuable particularly in addressing the structural inequalities.

2.6.5. Pakistan's Experience

Pakistan offers a different but equally instructive South Asian perspective on the challenges of educational reform. While India's CCE experience provides Nepal with a direct comparator for grading reform, Pakistan's experiences with grading reform illustrate that rather than comparing grading reform, the more substantial structural and governance barriers to education reform exist in South Asia for countries such as Nepal. Furthermore, Pakistan's education system is slightly different but equally important in this research context as it explores the South Asian perspective, In Pakistan, education system is divided into multiple tiers from primary (Grades 1–5), middle (6–8), secondary (9–10), higher secondary (11–12), and tertiary.

In Pakistan, the Single National Curriculum (SNC) was introduced to minimise inequality in the country's education system and was considered the most notable education reform. This reform has addressed the three major educational systems, public schools, private schools, and religious madrasas. The SNC aims to address the structural inequality that has long characterised its education system and to provide equal learning opportunities to all segments of society.

Pakistan's largest and most educationally significant province, Punjab, experienced a critical gap between policy intentions and practical implementation, where there was a huge lack of meaningful stakeholder engagement in the policy process (Bukhari, 2025). This finding also serves as a summary of the implementation challenges facing Nepal's SEE reform. Similarly, a comprehensive analysis of Pakistan's education policies identified

'tensions between centralised policy ambitions and fragmented implementation' as the defining feature of Pakistan's educational reform history (Jameel, 2026). As political instability has been a major challenge, and governance weaknesses have repeatedly undermined educational equity and quality over decades of educational reform in Pakistan, Nepal, which has also experienced frequent political changes, may face similar problems. A further lesson from Pakistan for Nepal is the challenges of reform without adequate local grading. Pakistan offers a number of lessons for Nepal regarding education. The first relates to the capacity required to implement and administer grade levels in an education system. The second relates to the need for training teachers. The third lesson is that educational reform can be difficult without having sufficient local capacity to implement and administer grading practices. The fourth lesson is that in order to achieve success with reform efforts, there needs to be support for those involved in the implementation process (Jameel, 2026). Pakistan's SNC, like India's CCE, has faced challenges in bringing policy intentions into classroom realities, mainly in rural and under-resourced schools Tayyaba (2012).

It can be observed that the scale of Pakistan's educational problems is significantly greater than Nepal's, but the structural dynamics are recognisably similar. According to UNICEF (2024), Pakistan has allocated around 1.5% of GDP to education, which is below the UNESCO and SDG-4 benchmark of 4–6%. The following table presents Nepal’s SEE reform within the broader South Asian regional context, highlighting the similarities and differences between Nepal's experience and those of its regional neighbours. Furthermore,

Dimension	Nepal (SEE)	India (CCE/NEP)	Pakistan (SNC/Matric)
Reform introduced	2016 (SEE replaced SLC) (Government of Nepal, 2016)	2009 CCE (CBSE, 2009); 2020 NEP (Government of India, 2020)	SNC introduced in 2021 (Government of Pakistan, 2021)
Primary driver	Reduce examination pressure and modernise assessment practices (Government of Nepal, 2016; NEB, 2020)	Move from rote learning towards holistic and competency-based learning (Government of India, 2020; NCERT, 2017)	Standardise curriculum and improve equity (Government of Pakistan, 2021)
Assessment philosophy	Letter grading combining internal and external assessment (NEB, 2020)	CCE; competency-based assessment (CBSE, 2009; Government of India, 2020)	Curriculum reform alongside traditional board examinations (Government of Pakistan, 2021)
Rural–urban gap	Educational inequalities remain a challenge (UNICEF, 2023; World Bank, 2024)	Regional and socio-economic disparities continue (UNESCO, 2023; World Bank, 2024)	Significant rural–urban inequalities remain (UNICEF, 2023; World Bank, 2024)
Teacher preparation	Teacher capacity-building remains a major implementation challenge (UNESCO, 2023; UNICEF, 2023)	Teacher preparedness is critical for successful implementation (UNESCO, 2023)	Teacher readiness and professional development remain challenges (UNESCO, 2023; World Bank, 2024)

Table 7: Nepal's grading system compared to India and Pakistan

Sources: *Compiled by the author from Government of Nepal (2016), MOEST (2021), CBSE (2009), Government of India (2020), Government of Pakistan (2021), NEB, (2020) NCERT, (2017). UNESCO (2023), World Bank (2024), UNICEF (2023).*

2.7 The Impact of Grading Practices on Students

According to Iamarino (2014), standards-based grading, as opposed to traditional grading systems, frees students from point collection and allows them to focus on learning. Natural inquiry and learning for its own sake are highly valued in the standards-based learning environment. SBG fosters intrinsic motivation by shifting their focus from accumulating grades to demonstrating mastery of specific learning objectives.

According to Brookhart (1993), students' sentiments or opinions about learning can significantly affect the learning process and cognitive growth. He explains grading as powerful instructional and psychological forces that affect the abilities and future academic prospects of the students.

According to Kutasi (2023), the reporting system we utilise and the messages we provide to students through those reports send a powerful message about their academic talents and how they approach learning in general. SBG reflects students' achievement in relation to well-defined standards (Tierney et al., 2011). This clarity improves the feedback process and improves instructional planning for teachers, which is critical for improving student learning (Black and Wiliam, 1998).

Traditional grading often leave students feeling trapped and unhappy, whereas standards-based grading practices place greater emphasis on learning and comprehension. Traditional grading procedures are frequently viewed as gatekeepers, and as Ricci (2014) puts it, a child who was ready to embrace a challenge and succeed now believes she cannot because of the school and/or educator's fixed attitude and gatekeeping techniques. He emphasised these rigid grading practices to limit the students' learning potential rather than enable progression.

Studies also emphasise the need for a balance between psychological relief and academic rigour. Grading systems have been associated with heightened levels of anxiety, depression, and, in extreme cases, suicidal ideation among students (Chung and Park, 2024; Fu, 2024). Rudland et al. (2020) advocate for moderate academic

pressure to sustain motivation and resilience. The Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan, 1985) supports this by suggesting that extrinsic rewards, such as grades, are critical when intrinsic motivation is insufficient. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) posits that people have three primary psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and that fulfilling these needs facilitates more self-determined forms of motivation (Bureau et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2024). When intrinsic motivation is low or absent, extrinsic rewards, such as grades, can provide external motivation for engagement and persistence (Howard et al., 2020). Evidence from meta-analyses supports the conclusion that students' intrinsic motivation, autonomy, and competence are enhanced when interventions are based on the principles of SDT (Wang et al., 2024). SDT provides a strong theoretical account for why grades remain important in educational contexts, even in the presence of limited intrinsic interest.

Teachers in the classroom observe the changes that occur when students concentrate on learning, as suggested by standards-based grading processes. Munoz and Guskey (2015) found that when they used standards-based grading systems, they had to dig deeper into each student's understandings, reducing the risk that students' triumphs and failings went unrecognized. This formative approach enables feedback and adjustments of instruction, helping the students improve their performance. Ultimately, grading and reporting are additional crucial instruments for what matters most: increasing student learning, Munoz and Guskey (2015, p. 68). Munoz and Guskey (2015) observed foreseeably that grading practice has the possibility to shape student motivation and feelings of achievement, which often determines how they regard their own learning.

Moreover, how grading reforms tasks across different educational contexts, this section draws briefly on international examples where grading policy changes have changed effects. Given the documented variation in teachers' grading assessments across cultures (Cheng, 2020).

The reform in the education system and the transformation from traditional education system to grading system can have both forms of implications.

Tan (2011) conducted a research study for which he discovered that the Ministry of Education in Singapore implemented some revisions to their testing methods. The revisions included: centrally evaluated projects based on groups, tests that are based more

on practical experiences than other forms of testing, and social studies that involve source and/or case studies. However, this transition from the old form of evaluation to the new did not function as intended. In addition, it was not effective at enhancing or improving students' performance in school. This suggests that changing from a traditional assessment system to a grade-based assessment system does not necessarily improve the student's learning and their performance.

A comprehensive study conducted by Bansilal (2011), with a large and diverse group of students in South Africa, highlights the challenges faced during the country's educational reform efforts. The South African government introduced a new assessment tool known as the Common Tasks for Assessment (CTA), replacing the traditional assessment system. This change was made without proper planning and preparation, and because of this, both teachers and learners were badly affected. This has created considerable confusion among teachers and students, where both found it difficult to cope with the new system. The study concluded that when the government makes such changes in the educational system, without adequate planning, capacity-building, and resource allocation, this can have adverse effects on students' learning and overall development.

These worldwide cases jointly highlight that the effect of grading reforms varies on system readiness, teacher capability, and policy support rather than national context itself. Their presence here is to underline universal lessons about how grading practices impact student learning across varying education systems.

2.8 Grading in the Eyes of Teachers

Teachers' choices can have long-term, emotional, and academic ramifications for children (Tierney et al., 2011). There has been research published that emphasizes the importance of teachers employing suitable and relevant grading procedures. Marzano (2000) led a series of workshops on classroom grading and asked the teachers in attendance a question. According to Marzano's (2000) findings, teachers almost universally believe that they have gotten incorrect grades. There is a scarcity of research on teachers' assessments of their own grading. There has been a study on teacher perception in relation to themes like traditional grading versus standards-based grading, but there are gaps in the research when it comes to teacher perceptions of their own grading.

In developing countries, the lack of standardized grading guidelines and training is a major challenge. For instance, in Sri Lanka, teachers in rural areas lacked access to trainings and resources leading to non-standardized grading practices that led to decrease in student's motivation and results (Nithlavarnan, 2024). Pal (2022) depicted that achieving excellence in teaching and learning requires well-trained, skilled teachers with strong technical expertise.

A case study was conducted in a rural Missouri high school to examine teacher and student perceptions of standards-based grading to see if there was a difference in student achievement in one rural Missouri school district using standards-based grading compared to student achievement in Missouri students using traditional grading practices (Winton, 2015). The high school where this research was done was chosen as a test site for standards-based grading. The sample for this study included all teachers who employed both standards-based and traditional grading. According to Townsley and Wilcox (2024), without standardised guidelines and professional development, the reliability of evaluation systems is compromised.

Even though the separate section of this thesis concentrates on Nepal, these studies are included here because they contribute specifically to understanding teachers' assessments of grading reforms. Their relevance lies in illustrating how teacher readiness and understanding of grading frameworks affect implementation of letter grading system, rather than analysing the Nepali education system itself.

In the study of 'Teachers' perceptions of Letter Grading System; Kafle (2020) found that teachers' experiences with the letter grading system have been deemed to be positively relevant, applicable, enthusiastic, and appropriate for challenging Nepal's educational system. Students and their parents' attitudes, on the other hand, are being shaped by a permissive promotion strategy that provides their child with a free upgrade. As a result, there is a disconnect between the evaluation procedure's practices and teachers' perceptions of the letter grading system (LGS) as a tool for improving students' performance. Teacher preparedness is essential for the successful implementation of any grading reform. Research in Nepal (Kafle, 2020; Chapagain, 2020) and Bangladesh (Goswami and Mumit, 2018) reported that inadequate training leads to inconsistent grading practices and misinterpretation of assessment frameworks.

Taylor (2007) examined instructor perceptions in a study on grade inflation. The study's goal was to see if there was grade inflation based on test results and teacher perceptions. To what extent do teachers feel grade inflation exists, Taylor asked in one of his research questions about teacher views (p. 94). Taylor used a survey as well as 10 one-on-one interviews to answer this research topic. High school teachers from a single high school took part in the study. Taylor's data backed up her assertion that grades are inflated in some cases. Grade inflation runs counter to the idea that marks should be consistent and accurate, which are two important features of meaningful grades. When their surveys were checked for internal consistency by entering their responses into SPSS software, Cronbach's Alpha showed a high reliability for the items, according to Taylor.

According to Taylor (2007), 92% of teachers believe the high school report card adequately reflects student learning. This statement contradicts several of the subsequent participant responses. Teachers also expressed a level of trust in awarded grades in response to other questions about grading criteria (Taylor, 2007). Many of the survey replies implied that teachers did not believe grades were inflated.

Grade inflation is not visible if students produce better work, teachers do not decrease standards, students obtain higher grades, and students perform better on standardised examinations, according to previous research findings and definitions of grade inflation. (Taylor, 2007, p. 95)

Taylor (2007) found that approximately 84.3 per cent of those asked about pressure from parents reported experiencing pressure from them to some extent, and likewise, approximately 75.1 per cent of those asked about pressure from administrators stated that they experienced pressure in this area.

Teachers said they adjust children's grades to avoid parent-teacher conferences 76.3 per cent of the time. Teachers also stated that they manipulate grades to improve their yearly assessments, with 83 per cent saying they change grades to make their failure rates look better (true to some degree, at 78.9 per cent) (Taylor, 2007). Finally, according to Taylor, most teachers in this survey agree that grade inflation exists, with 75.85 per cent believing so.

Similar to the findings of Goswami & Mumit (2018), teachers in Bangladesh can also use their subjective discretion to either overstate or understate students' grade levels because they do not have any clearly defined guidelines for how to implement this policy.

Various studies have been undertaken for various purposes in relation to grading and teacher perceptions, all of which have revealed similar challenges and concerns. Guskey (2002, p. 1) performed research to see if there were any disparities in how different stakeholder groups viewed grading and reporting. Questionnaires were given to regular education teachers in grades 3 through 12, as well as some students and parents. The parent and student survey were distributed in 30 copies to each participating instructor. The study focused on three fundamental grading issues: (1) perceptions of actual and ideal grading distributions, (2) the purpose of grades, and (3) the sources of information utilized to determine students' marks (Guskey, 2002). It is believed that this information can assist in guiding such efforts and serve as a foundation for other academics interested in this vital area of investigation, Guskey (2002) continued.

Guskey's (2002) study yielded mixed results, with some commonalities between teachers, parents, and students and others that differed. The responses varied depending on the grade level. Teachers, parents, and students ranked communication with parents first and feedback for students second in Guskey's (2002) Table 3 related to the purpose of grades; however, there were differences in teacher and parent responses as they related to communication in another section of the survey.

Teachers and students generally agreed on their ratings of various grading factors, implying that teachers do an excellent job of conveying to their students what evidence would be considered in determining their scores. Parents' scores, on the other hand, show that they are less well informed (Guskey, 2002). Research demonstrates that there is still a need for analysis and research to be undertaken around the topic of grading.

2.9 Evolution of the School Leaving Certificate (SLC) Examination and the Beginnings of Grading Reform in Nepal

Grading is a critical component of educational assessment which impacts the learning process of students and shapes how academic success is defined. For

numerous decades, the School Leaving Certificate (SLC) examination, or the Iron Gate, served as Nepal's public and national school-completion examination. The examinations, which was begun under the inspiration of the Indian school system in the early 20th century, became the crucial requirement for the students completing Grade 10 to continue to higher secondary or university studies (Mathema and Bista, 2006; Bhatta, 2005). The SLC examination, typically required for students aged 15 – 16, served as a pass-or-fail examination, demanding a minimum of 32 per cent in each subject to pass (MOE, 2016). Between 1924 and its discontinuance in 2015, it significantly influenced Nepal's educational structure, social expectations, and national beliefs of academic success. This section outlines the historical developments, limitations of past systems, and recent reforms made in the grading system in Nepal. This section also highlights why a formal and structured grading system is essential in Nepal.

According to Mathema (2007, p 46), Nepal has one of the world's youngest modern education systems. After the 104-year rule of the Rana oligarchy in Nepal came to an end in 1951, there were only 9,000 students in elementary schools, 1,700 in secondary schools, and a little over 100 in two undergraduate universities. In Nepal, there were very few universities until 1991, and adult literacy was about 5%.

Before the creation of the SLC Board in Nepal, the exam was held by two Indian universities. To hold the SLC test, Durbar High School, the sole high school in Nepal at the time, was affiliated with Calcutta University of India in 1880 (Nepali year 1936) and afterwards with Patna University of India in 1924. Until the SLC Board was created in 1934, SLC candidates from Nepal had to travel to Calcutta or Patna University to take the SLC test. Nepalese students began taking the SLC exam locally after that, but the exam was still devised, administered, and regulated by Patna University.

The university developed the exam questions at the time before sending them to Nepal for administration. The university's designated administrators oversaw the examination, collected the answer books, had them graded, and then published the results. The SLC examination was not conducted independently by the Nepalese government until 1947. During this period, the examination preserved the same high-stakes character that would later characterise the SLC era: success meant entry into advanced studies or government employment, while failure often meant the

end of SLC education (Mathema, 2007). As a result, the SLC test did not begin immediately in Nepal until 1934, when the SLC Exam Board was established. There have been significant revisions to the exam's grading scheme, administration, and public image since it was first introduced in Nepal.

Mathema and Bista (2006) discuss how SLC exam answer books were marked and presented the procedural phases of Nepal's SLC exam marking system. Mathema and Bista offered the following observations on the SLC exam's grading scheme: The answer sheets for the SLC exam are collected at the Office of the Controller of Examinations to designated marking locations (OCE). Both Regional Education Directorates and District Education Offices could serve as marking centres. Answer books were marked using a conference marking technique, a process where subject examiners were under the supervision of head examiners. Examiners needed to visit the answer books to marking centres under a conference marking scheme. Answer books were marked by a group of subject examiners under this system. Before the answer booklets were issued for marking, they were tagged in the marking centres and then provided to the examiners individually or through the corresponding subject head examiners. Only the six core topics, as well as Optional Mathematics and Computer Education, used coding, meaning that identities of students were hidden to reduce bias in grading.

The fundamental aim of coding, according to Mathema and Bista (2006), is to safeguard the identity of the examinee and the secrecy of the answer books. They also go into how marks are checked: After marking the answer sheets, two copies of the mark slips are sent to the Controller of Examinations' office. The SLC Examination Board allows the publication of results after they had been verified; the results were published in Kathmandu in a government daily newspaper called Gorkha Patra. Within 60 days of the last exam date, the results are usually published in June/July (p, 199).

Mathema (2007), commenting on the worrying decline in SLC exam achievement, says: Unfortunately, failure was more common than success in SLC examinations. An examination of the SLC results over the last 10 years reveals a failure rate of over 55% on average, indicating a significant waste of public and private education resources. Even more concerning is the enormous social cost that this high failure rate imposes on the country, as most failures occur among children from socially

and economically disadvantaged backgrounds who attend public schools in rural areas (Bhatta, 2005).

Nepal's established School Leaving Certificate (SLC) examination was an extraordinarily high-stakes, pass/fail model that applied important psychological pressure on students and was normally referred as the Iron Gate, (The Himalayan Times, 2014; Davies, 2015). Failures regularly face social stigma, school failures, and mental health disasters (The Kathmandu Post, 2015). The limitations of pass/fail structure, the psychological burden to the students and mismatch between assessment and learning outcomes led to need to reform Nepal's grading model. These conditions finally led to the replacement of the traditional SLC with the Grade 10 Secondary Education Examination (SEE) in 2016, marking a change from a binary pass/fail model to a letter-grading system envisioned to identify diverse levels of student accomplishment (MOE, 2016).

2.10 The Impact of the SLC system

As discussed previously, the SLC test is an important and well-known public examination in Nepal's educational system. Many people still believe that the SLC exam can aid in the improvement of academic standards in a variety of ways (Bhatta, 2005). Mathema and Bista (2006) provided several positive outcomes of high-stakes public tests, which appear to apply to the SLC exams.

They are as follows:

May assist in raising academic standards in a variety of ways (Bhatta, 2005).

1) Public examinations encourage schools and teachers to do better and be held accountable for their performance; (2) they force teachers to cover the entire course content; (3) they motivate students to learn more; (4) they create a competitive learning environment among students and schools; and (5) they provide a foundation for developing remedial and other special courses for students at risk of failing the examinations. Although the SLC test results have some beneficial repercussions, they have been overshadowed by the larger number of SLC exam failures and the negative consequences that come from them.

According to Parajuli (2012), 10 young people committed suicide between 2011 and 2012. A girl in Tanahu district killed herself shortly after hearing her examination result (Wagle, 2015). Similarly, Gyawali (2013) highlighted the need for school teachers and parents to be

aware that suicide is a major public health issue among school-aged young people. In Nepal, students were required to pass the SLC examination to progress to higher levels of education. Due to its importance and the difficulty associated with passing it, the SLC examination earned the title of the 'Iron Gate'. There have been reports in Nepal of some students committing suicide following a failure on the SLC exams; this illustrates that there is social pressure from the family as well as other families to perform well on examinations.

In the past few years there have been several school children that committed suicide in Nepal after they had failed their School Leaving Certificate (SLC) exams or rejected to sit for exams (Kathmandu Post, 2014; The Himalayan Times, 2016; The Himalayan Times, 2014; Kathmandu Post, 2016). As the name above reflects and the sequence of events has risen to serious concern.

Bhattarai (2014) examines how Nepal's School Leaving Certificate (SLC) examination exerts immense pressure on students, leading to harmful consequences. Often labelled as 'the iron gate ', this national exam is treated as a crucial turning point for educational and career progression. Bhattarai's mixed-method research identifies four main negative outcomes linked to the SLC: long-lasting personal setbacks, emotional distress, restricted career choices, and, in severe instances, student suicides. Drawing from qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys involving students, teachers, parents, and school administrators, the study uncovers how intense societal expectations and minimal emotional support make students particularly vulnerable during this period. Failure in the SLC is frequently seen as a reflection of the individual's worth, contributing to feelings of shame, social isolation, and psychological hardship. The effects are especially damaging for students from underprivileged communities, who lack access to resources and alternative academic paths. Bhattarai proposes several interventions, such as broadening educational options to include vocational training, improving mental health and guidance support, and revising the examination system to reduce its disproportionate influence. The thesis urges stakeholders to rethink the structure and implications of the SLC to better protect students' well-being and future opportunities (Bhattarai, 2014).

SLC was considered a powerful gatekeeper for students; in his study, Bhattarai (2014) further highlighted the two major reasons for the significance of the SLC

exam. First, it was a mandatory or basic requirement for students to pass this exam for further academic endeavours. Second, its social and cultural importance was identified as a highly symbolic test for academic success. He further explains that because of this, students, along with their families, face immense pressure to perform well.

2.11 Introduction of the Secondary Education Examination (SEE) and the Letter Grading System in Nepal

The fundamental component of the letter grading system is how the data are crunched to determine the given letter. Letter grades can be a valuable component of a good grading system, but how the letter is chosen to indicate student learning and accomplishment is crucial.

Teachers frequently use an average to determine the letter that will be allocated. The most often utilised calculation to establish a student's grade has been branded as averaging (Marzano, 2000). The concept of taking numerous pieces of work, averaging them together, and calculating a final grade is widely accepted.

Following rising criticism of the high-stakes SLC examination, the Government of Nepal replaced it in 2015/16 with the Secondary Education Examination (SEE), presenting a letter grading system designed to align national assessment standards with global practices and diminish examination-related stress (MOE, 2016; Singh, 2016).

The SLC examination in Nepal was started since 1934 for 82 years up to 2015. In the 1980s, the SLC system allowed the students to retake only low-scoring subjects the following year. After facing numerous challenges in the 2000s, the SLC system allowed students to score at least 16 marks in 2 subjects to reappear in the exams within a month of the results. The exams initially used 60% questions from Grade 10, and 40% questions from Grade 9. However, the revised structure in 2009 eliminated the content from Grade 9 and used Grade 10 only to grade in SLC examinations (Pal, 2022).

In Nepal, previously a numerical marking evaluation system in all forms of exams to assess students' achievement was used up until 2016 which is also known as School Leaving Certificate (SLC). Until 2016, the SLC was known as the Grade 10 final test. However, it was changed and renamed the SEE examination after 2016.

Nepal's evaluation system was highly formalized and regulated. It was directed from top to bottom through their local bodies to respect the rules and regulations that they had established about the evaluation system. Without a specific location and time frame, there was no evidence of flexibility and personalized treatment plans. There were other obstacles, including a lack of provision for students to upgrade their qualifications through assignments on subjects or a variety of other methods.

SLC examination in Nepal had been regarded as a challenging milestone for every student in their personal and academic life. Being successful in SLC led to high social esteem, perception that the students can secure good employment and positive societal perception of society towards the students. In the past, SLC held significant societal prestige for the students. However, the SLC also led to unhealthy competition and increased anxiety among the students (Pal, 2022). Due to unhealthy competition and increased disparities between government and private schools, the SLC exam faced widespread criticism. Only 21% to 29% of students passed in public schools, whereas 70% to 79% of students passed in private schools from 2010 to 2022 (Pal, 2022). The SLC system had other negative consequences for students' psychology and career-related aspects, leading to high dropout rates and unhealthy competition (Pal, 2022). Keeping the criticisms of SLC in mind, the Government of Nepal introduced the Secondary Education Examination (SEE) system, which replaced the SLC in 2015/16. The SEE system simplified the scheme from Grade 6-10 to Grade 8-12. The SEE is administered nationally at the end of Grade 10 and assesses student accomplishment across eight subjects. Unlike the earlier SLC, the SEE uses a Letter Grading System (LGS) that categorises student performance into grade bands (A+ to NG) rather than a single pass/fail score (MoE, 2016). Students obtaining a minimum GPA of 1.6 (Grade D) are eligible for Grade 11 enrolment, while those receiving an NG are required to retake examinations (Pal, 2022).

Bhattarai's (2014) study shows that the two aspects, (i) its specific academic stakes (e.g., a mandatory requirement for school graduation, a door to job opportunity, an end of school exam) and (ii) the general socio-cultural stakes (e.g., a first performance measurement exam, a large participatory national exam, a long-term investment, an issue of face and prestige) augmented the overall stakes of the SLC exam. In addition to these aspects, the MOE's policy further heightened the stakes

of the SLC exam. As reported by Mathema and Bista (2006), the school administrators and teachers felt enormous pressure for better exam results due to MOE's policy that also contributed to an increase in the stakes of the SLC exam.

After years of adopting SLC system in Nepal, the introduction of SEE system was in line with the system adopted by many developed and developing countries. In the traditional high-stakes pass/fail model, a single mark could drastically determine a student's future, for example, by resulting in a student having 31 marks as a failure and 32 as a pass/successful. On the other hand, the new SEE grading system includes grades for broader interpretation, for example, A grade can represent a range of 80-90 marks rather than a fixed number (Singh, 2016). Supporting the new system, Wagle (2016) highlighted that SEE system reduces exam related stress as the minimum NG grade is also not ranked as failure, but it was recognised as Not Graded. However, it also can lead to some drawbacks including reduced motivation, and an increased number of unskilled students (Wagle, 2016). The beginning of the SEE brought numerous substantial reforms to Nepal's education system. It intended to (a) shift valuation from rote memorization to competency-based learning, (b) decrease the mental pressure of single-result examinations, and (c) offer students more opportunities for subject-level development rather than complete failure (MOE, 2016; Wagle, 2016).

S. N	Percentage	Grading Score	Letter Grade	Description
1	90 Above	4	A+	Outstanding
2	80 to 90	3.6	A	Excellent
3	70 to 80	3.2	B+	Very Good
4	60 to 70	2.8	B	Good
5	50 to 60	2.4	C+	Satisfactory
6	40 to 50	2	C	Acceptable
7	35 to 40	1.6	D	Basic
8	Less than 35	-	NG	Non-Graded

Table 5: Letter Grading Guidelines 2021

According to the Letter Grading Guidelines 2021, the student performance is categorised into eight levels, ranging from A+ (Outstanding) for scores above 90% to NG (Non-Graded) for scores below 35%. In the past, students with grades D+ and E were allowed to advance their performance despite low scores. However, under new policy, students having scores less than 35% (1.6 GPA) are considered NG, with no provision for promotion (Pal, 2022).

The introduction of a letter grading system in Nepal aimed to reduce academic stress and align assessment practices with international standards (Pal, 2022). However, concerns have been raised regarding its effectiveness in differentiating student performance. Similarly, Joshi (2024) and Rone et al. (2023) identify reduced academic motivation as an unintended side effect of lenient grading.

Furthermore, numerous issues with the former evaluation method made it difficult to achieve high scores. In an analysis of the numeration system of written tasks, high-achieving children have seldom gotten first divisions (CERID, 2016). The

students' values were granted to them by earning higher scores than the cut-off scores on their mark sheets, rather than by requiring and judging them based on their intrinsic creative and constructive actions. Students who received a high percentage or division in the examination are praised.

Traditional evaluations can be subjective (depending on the technique of evaluation utilized) and impacted by (conscious or unconscious) teacher bias, which is one of the most widely documented concerns. Furthermore, when various individuals rate or score samples of learners' work differently, even when using the same evaluation criteria, students may be affected by bias (Schinske and Tanner, 2014). Considering the flaws in Nepal's previous assessment system, the Ministry of Education (MoE) implemented letter grading in the SEE evaluation system to reform the old system as much as possible. After a lengthy discussion of the Letter Grading System at the official level, it was determined that the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the Office of Examination Controller (OEC) had taken a formal decision to implement the Letter Grading System in Nepal's SEE since 2015, with plans to expand to other classes as the students' meritocracy improves. The letter grade system introduced categories (e.g. A+, A, B+, B) rather than absolute pass/fail outcomes.

Different levels of students in the same class might be divided based on their competency levels. The impact of a lenient grading scheme vs a rigid grading scale on students' achievement is examined Wagle (2016), in which the level of average mastery in the letter category (the grade of D) corresponds to the Secondary Education Examination's minimum passing criteria (SEE). Some educationalists argue that it assesses learners' capacities based on hierarchical categories in this way.

Wagle (2016) rationalises that the new SLC means the SEE grading system is proposed to be recovered to signify students' capability. In a subject-by-subject study, the level of students is grouped based on distinct point score averages and examined as a grade point average for the entire subject. The main issue is that the students are not 'failed;' yet there is a provision for categorizing unsatisfactory performance, as there is no provision for an 'E' grade (Wagle, 2016). Students who have a GPA of less than 1.6 and do not receive a D+ in at least one subject are not eligible to enrol in grade eleven. Because of its compliance with various categorical features of standardisation, it is readily accepted and implemented in industrialised

countries, and parents are also properly informed and guided to help their children at home about the principles and practices of the letter grading system.

Nonetheless, the number of enrolled students in SEE has climbed year after year. As a result, the passing percentage of students has grown, and the majority of those who have passed have received low grades, particularly below C+. As a result, it is vital to do research and take proactive steps to address potential misunderstandings, set up plans to address them, and prepare guidelines in time for LGS implementation in Nepal (Rijal et al., 2017). The grading system was introduced with limited prior training for teachers and little public communication. The implementation of the SEE required extensive orientation and training for teachers to recognise the new grading principles and commentary formats. Nonetheless, teacher training programmes were initially restricted. Studies have shown that many teachers struggled to understand grade forms clearly and report learning progress effectively to students and parents (Rijal *et al.*, 2017; Aryal, 2016). Constant professional development, moderation mechanisms, and local-level evaluation guidance were later introduced through the federal education structure to address these gaps (MOEST, 2019). As a result, teachers and students misunderstood the new grading criteria (Rijal et al., 2017).

The SEE system was introduced designed to solve the challenges and criticisms of the traditional SLC system. However, despite various positive aspects, the SEE system also has its own challenges that must be dealt with for its proper implementation. For instance, students should attain a minimum GPA to qualify for higher education, and the threshold can limit their choices of subjects of their interest (Aryal, 2016). Proper guidelines and trained teachers are essential for the proper implementation of the grading system

With the onset of Nepal's federal governance structure after 2015, the implementation and organisation of the SEE and Letter Grading System became regionalised, with district education offices gaining greater responsibility for examination administration and teacher training. This change reflects how grading reform cooperates with the broader transformation of Nepal's education governance system.

2.12 Federalisation and Education in Nepal and Its Impact

Federalism is widely recognized as a system or framework for promoting stability, peace and cooperation in the nation which is divided into territorial divisions of race, religion or language aimed at strengthening democratic resilience, decentralizing decision- making, enhancing service delivery and preventing over-centralization of power/resources (Bulmer, 2015). Watt (1998) defines federalization as a political system composed of different constituent units and a central government, each having its own authority from the people through the Constitution of the nation. Each division in federalization has its own powers including legislative, administrative and taxation through the election system.

Federalisation in Nepal refers to the country's transformati on from a centralised single state to a three-tier federal formation as explained by the 2015 Constitution. This change aimed to address long-standing regional inequalities, encourage inclusion of marginalised classes, and devolve decision-making authority among federal, provincial, and local levels (MOEST, 2021; Acharya, 2018). While the theory of federalism presents the notional foundation for regionalized governance, *federalisation* depicts Nepal's realistic journey in applying that approach.

Similarly, these international examples express a gradual growth of federalism as a system of government, the federalisation in Nepal developed out of long years of political trouble and the urgent need for adequate representation on the part of minorities, the federalisation process developed following the People's Movement of 2006 and the Constitution 2015 (Sharma et al,2020; Breen, 2018).

Federalism includes a range of structures comprised of various constituent units. As a normative concept, federalism supports shared governance through institutional arrangements. In 1787, the United States adopted this system, which was later adopted by other nations, including Canada, Switzerland, and Australia (Paleker, 2006). Similarly, in the post-colonial era, it was adopted by emerging economies in Africa to ensure national unity and governance (Eghosa-Osaghae, 2004). After the Second World War, federalism spread across the world to balance power and build institutional relationships (Keating, 2007). The governance models led to a rise in decentralisation and citizen participation by the 1980s (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011). By the late 20th century, federalization has been practiced for allowing

government responses to major issues like civil rights and economic reform across the world (Welch et al., 2012).

Federalisation in Nepal began with political reforms that followed the 1990 restoration of democracy but was reinforced by the decade-long Maoist conflict (1996-2006) which resulted in demands from civil society for more inclusive governance and ethnic self-management. These demands were met through the Constituent Assembly to create an inclusive federal democratic state as stated in the 2015 constitution (Acharya, 2018), creating 7 new provinces and 753 municipalities with specific authority and fiscal responsibilities.

In Nepal, the federal system introduced has a three-tier administrative structure, including federal, provincial, and local levels, which aims to decentralise power, encourage more participatory governance, and bring the government closer to the people (Acharya, 2018). The introduction of the federal system in Nepal posed various challenges to its effective implementation, including a rising financial burden associated with bureaucratic administrative structures and expanded parliamentary systems. The shortage of skilled civil servants and logistics was also a challenge. Furthermore, conflicts arose across different provinces regarding the distribution and sharing of natural resources such as forests, rivers, and minerals (Pal, 2022). The distribution of power related to taxation has also been a major challenge. Due to a lack of effective management, duplicate taxation has taken place at the local and provincial levels, resulting in a replication of effort, a waste of resources, delays in infrastructure expansion, as well as in several services, leading to an overall delay in the country's development (Dhungel, 2017; MOEST, 2021).

The federal system in Nepal was introduced to achieve effective governance and inclusive development by empowering local bodies. The decentralisation of functions related to various infrastructure development, such as education, health, resources, etc. and proper coordination across the federal provinces can play an important role in balanced development of the nation. Decentralisation also improves the quality and timeliness of delivery service and leads to responsible public expenditure by the government. Moreover, it also strengthens the democratic practices at the grassroots level of the country (Local Governance Act, 2074; Acharya, 2018b).

Building upon previous discussions of federalism and how it affects educational governance, the next section will critically review the literature regarding the changes to grading policies in Nepal, as well as identifying gaps in both empirical research and classroom experience that have shaped this dissertation study.

2.13 A Critical Evaluation of Literature

The literature has reviewed the evidence that Nepal's change from the outdated SLC to the SEE letter-grading system signifies a substantial learning reform influenced by both domestic pressures for fairness and the clearer reforms that took place under federalisation. Nonetheless, there was limited empirical research on exactly how these reforms have affected student motivation, their lived experience, teacher practices, and their lived experiences and evaluation practices across provinces. Current studies principally document policy goals rather than classroom experiences, leaving a gap in understanding how local authorities and schools translate and realise marking standards.

Further understanding of these gaps and viewpoints of the various stakeholders will be obtained by reviewing literature that examines current grading practice, perception and reporting system in educational settings.

2.13.1 Discussion on Grading System

When it comes to grading and grading processes, there is a lot of confusion among the stakeholder groups of parents, teachers, administrators, and students. Student disagreements over the information teachers should consider when assigning final course grades can be a frequent source of conflict (Gaultney and Cann, 2001). Given the numerous meanings and implications of grades, as well as the misalignment of grades with content-specific, standards-aligned instructional goals (O'Connor, 2009), this is unsurprising. In our educational marketplace, grades, particularly at the secondary level, are cash (Guskey, 2001). In other words, he means that grades function like a valuable currency in education.

Guskey (2002) sought to determine whether there were any disparities in how students, parents, and teachers perceived grading and reporting. It was created to examine similarities and differences among teachers', students', and parents' perceptions of the purposes of grading and reporting, the actual and ideal distributions of grades, and the factors considered when determining grades or

marks. He found no substantial differences in views of actual grade distributions between teachers and students, although parents perceived a higher percentage of A's. There were no significant differences in ideal grade distributions between parents and students; however, teachers said that a smaller percentage of A's would be preferable.

A substantial negative association was found between grade level and estimates of both the actual and ideal percentages of A's. This suggests that when students' grade levels rise, instructors, parents, and students perceive a lower percentage of children earning A's. This is also considered appropriate by all three groups. In terms of grade distribution, this study found that most primary school instructors believe that an ideal distribution of marks would have most children earning the best possible grades (As and Bs), with few or no children receiving low or failing grades.

Secondary school teachers tend to believe that grades follow a normal distribution. Parents of primary students generally believe that their children will excel academically. Parents of middle and high school students, on the other hand, frequently stated that the ideal grade of dispersion would approximate a normal distribution pattern, with grades distributed more evenly throughout grade categories. This, according to Guskey (2001), could be linked to their educational experiences.

Students feel effort should impact grading, according to research (Gaultney and Cann, 2001). However, teachers' attitudes regarding effort are not uniform. According to other research and measurement specialists (Wormeli, 2006), teachers should only grade students based on their performance.

Guskey (2007) investigated the extent of agreement between teachers and administrators in the alignment of various assessments (including course grades) to student learning in a study of 314 teachers and administrators in three states. According to the data, neither teachers nor administrators thought course grades were acceptable or reliable indications of student achievement. Teachers were shown to value student work quality and classroom observation, whereas administrators preferred standardized examinations. Standardized examinations are advised, administered, and marked in a uniform method to verify equality and comparison across students, schools, or regions (Popham, 2014). They are normally

utilized to evaluate learning outcomes, evaluate academic accomplishment, and update learning policy decisions (Brookhart et al., 2016).

Each group has varied desires for what a grade should communicate, which is a recurrent theme in literature. Parents want the following changes in grading and reporting, according to Guskey (2002): (a) detailed and regular information about their child's learning progress, (b) detailed information about how their child is doing in school, and (c) specific, practice suggestions on how to help their child in the learning process. Another area of misalignment discovered by Wormeli (2006) is parents' desire to know how their child compares to other students.

Teachers' perceptions of grading are based on four sources (Gusky and Bailey, 2001): (a) policies they encountered as students, (b) the teacher's personal ideologies of teaching and learning, (c) grading policies that affect the teacher's daily work or job responsibilities, and (d) what they learned about grading in their teacher preparation programs. Similarly, McMillan and Workman (1998) claimed that teachers continue to grade as they were marked because they were successful in that grading framework owing to internal success-bias, the belief that teachers want students to succeed using the same methods that worked for them.

According to Wormeli (2006), most teachers grade students because they are compelled to. Students' impressions of grading processes frequently differ from those of their teachers and parents. Grading and evaluation have been a part of most people's lives since they were children. These encounters are almost always verbal and frank, with rapid reaction whether positive or negative. In early primary school, these relationships continue, with the teacher adopting a parenting role during the school day and depending mainly on direct, verbal interactions with students. Teachers, on the other hand, seek to keep parents informed about their children's progress and learning.

Because there is no way for teachers to transmit all their observations and knowledge, the material must be condensed into a symbol, a collection of symbols, or an overall summary. Grade is the teacher's summary evaluation of students' work and accomplishments over a pre-defined section of the school year in elementary school (Guskey and Bailey, 2001).

Students' perceptions begin to shift in middle school. This, according to Guskey and Bailey (2001), is due to the shift from mostly formative evaluations to a focus on

summative examinations. Students no longer see grades as feedback, but as judgment at the secondary level. This marks the start of a slow but consistent shift in students ' attention away from learning and onto what they must do to achieve the grade as a commodity. " What do I have to do to achieve an 'A'?" is a common question that arises from this cognitive process. How many points can I get for...? And is this graded?

Furthermore, it leads students to regard learning as a means of earning a grade, thereby separating information acquisition from its ultimate purpose. This helps to explain why many students view assignment completion as a means of obtaining a grade and extra credit as a means of obtaining the next highest mark - it's not about learning; it's about points (Guskey and Bailey, 2001). It also helps to explain what refers to the classroom's points-driven academic economy. Students learn what they can do to improve their grade and what they can get away with not doing in this system, depending on the teacher. Students... learn that the grade commodity can be obtained through behaviours other than their actual performance (Guskey and Bailey, 2001).

Adams (2005) discovered that students consistently believed effort should account for much more of the final course mark than teachers in a sample of 159 students. According to his research, more than 70% of students anticipate achieving at least a 'C' in non-major courses if they work hard, even if they fail to demonstrate that they have absorbed the minimum amount of knowledge necessary by the instructor. Only a small percentage of professors believed that such effort without results merited a 'C' grade. From the perspective of students, it appears that they believe that hard work, effort, and good behaviour are enough to obtain passing or better grades, regardless of academic performance.

Additionally, while policy documents underline decentralisation as a path to inclusivity, few studies investigate whether federalisation has lowered regional disparities in educational resources or results. This gap emphasises the need for field-based review into students' and teachers' experiences with SEE or the letter Grading System under Nepal's new federal structure. Therefore, the next part will summarise the chapter that addresses the enquiries for this study and justifies it, and also develops the study's objectives and research questions in Chapter 1.

2.13 Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined the historical evolution, types, and implications of different grading systems. It began by tracing the historical development of grading practices globally, showing the shift from traditional grading systems to standards-based grading systems. The chapter also examined the benefits and challenges of traditional grading systems, as well as the need for a standards-based grading system. The chapter also outlined the experiences of grading in developed and developing economies.

This literature review has had a significant impact upon how I have developed my methodology for this study. Based on the constructivist philosophy underpinning this review, grading practices are socially constructed. Hence, there will be different understandings of what grading reform experiences are for students, teachers and government officials. Therefore, based on this justification, a phenomenological approach was taken to explore the lived experiences and subjective interpretations of grading reforms within the Nepalese context. Furthermore, previous studies that focused on perception, experience, and meaningful context emphasised the need for qualitative methods to capture depth rather than generalisation.

In this way, the evidence and discussion from the literature review provide a basis for both summarising key insights and demonstrating how the results of these reviews influenced the methodological decisions made in the next chapter.

Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the research methodology that was used to conduct this study. This will include a discussion of the philosophical approaches considered for this study. The rationale for the philosophical approach and methodological strategy that I have employed in this study is important. A description will be provided of how data were collected and analysed, as well as of the ethical concerns that arose during the research process. Additionally, the chapter includes a reflective consideration of my own positionality and its impact upon all aspects of the research process, including my role in designing the research, collecting data, analysing data, and interpreting results. My positionality refers to my educational background, cultural identity, and professional experience, particularly my role as a student during data collection and, later, as both a student and a teacher during data analysis and interpretation. As such, my use of a qualitative methodology for this study reflects my desire to explore the individual perceptions of students, teachers, and government officials regarding the Secondary Education Examination (SEE) grading system in Nepal. I believe that considering each stakeholder's individual perspective is fundamental to gaining a comprehensive understanding of how the SEE grading system has executed in Nepal.

The chapter is divided into three mains as the arrows below shows the sections:

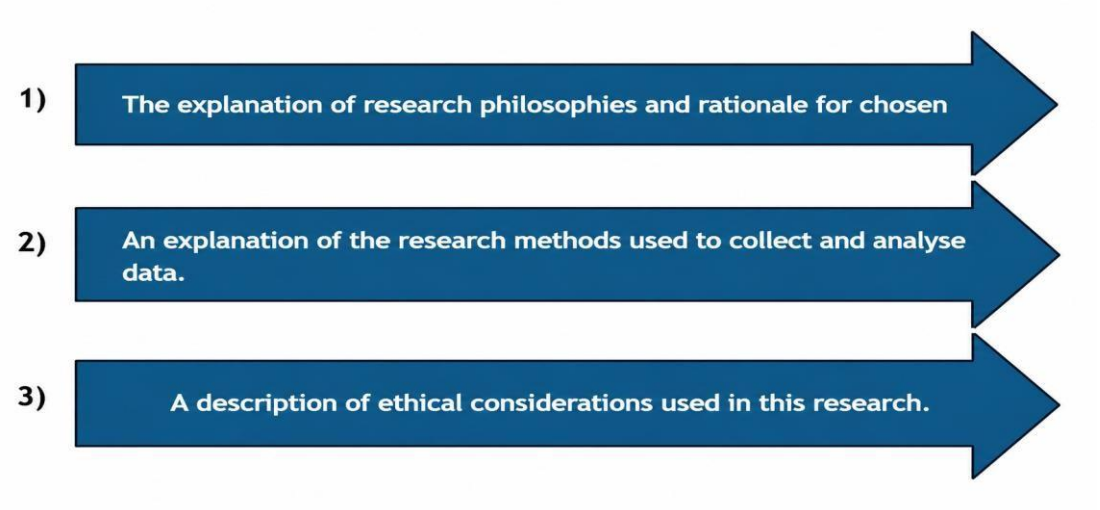


Figure 1: Shows the main parts of methodology

The first stage of this chapter explains the key philosophical terms that eventually informed my methodological choices. In other words, I have also explained the terms which were foundational concepts to the journey of what is chosen.

3.2 Research Philosophies and Rationale

Various research foundational concepts, philosophies and rationale were explored further as follows:

3.2.1 Foundational Concepts

In philosophy, epistemology refers to what counts as knowledge and how knowledge is understood.

Epistemology is the part of philosophy that examines how we come to have knowledge and which types of claims to knowledge are considered valid or reliable (Crotty, 1998). It is concerned with questions such as "How do we know if something is true?" and Is knowledge based on experience, or does it need to be proven through factual evidence? In the context of research, epistemology guides researchers to evaluate whether knowledge, when making sense of their field of study, is discovered, as researchers work with facts in science; or created, as people create meaning in their personal story.

In education research, epistemology also influences how we think about students and teachers, including content domain, learning, and teaching. For example, if I adopt the position that knowledge is objective, I may seek to measure learning using exams or standardised tests to demonstrate how much the learner has learned, while someone who believes knowledge is subjective may want to gather their thoughts through interviews or conversations (Mack, 2010).

Research paradigms are shaped through different understandings of epistemology. For example, positivism, ontologically, is underpinned by the idea that knowledge must be observable and measurable. When taking an interpretivist stance, we consider that human beings live and operate in social contexts and that knowledge is formed through social interactions, with shared understanding emerging from these interactions (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). In contrast, critical theorists seek to understand how knowledge is shaped by power and politics and aim to uncover hidden truths (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2011).

Understanding yourself from an epistemological perspective is important because it helps guide your research choices. It will influence how you gather data, what types of questions you will ask, and how you will make sense of your results (Scotland, 2012).

Ontology means What is real. Or exists.

Ontology is the study of what exists and comes to be, and of what constitutes a person who understands what is real in the world (Blaikie, 2000). In research, ontology helps us understand whether there is a single reality that everyone shares or different realities that depend on personal views. Some believe that we all share one reality as it is, while some believe that everyone's reality differs based on individuals' experiences (Mack, 2010).

A positivist believes in one single reality which can be objectively measured. For instance, a scientist can objectively measure temperature or student performance, which we agree are aspects of only one objective reality. We often find this perspective within experiments and statistical research. In contrast, a constructivist believes that individuals construct their own reality by synthesising their own background and context. Thus, another student's experiences while attending the same school may be completely different from his or her own (Crotty, 1998).

Ontology also helps us identify the kind of questions we will ask in the research. If we believe in a single reality, researchers will likely seek a truth that can be verified in response to the research question. Consequently, research questions of this type are generally objective in focus (i.e., they are based on data that is quantifiable, observable, and verifiable). Research questions of this type are developed to evaluate hypotheses and/or determine cause-and-effect relationships, as well as provide information that may be applied to broader populations.

On the other hand, if we do not believe a single reality exists at all, our research may be an account of people's stories, experiences, and perceptions (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2011). Identifying our own study's ontological position makes it easier to show continuity. The right methods, goals, and interpretations are aligned to your picture of reality (Guba and Lincoln, 1994).

Methodology means: How do we study the world? Methodology is the plan or strategy for conducting research. Methodology brings together your beliefs about

reality (ontology) and knowledge (epistemology) with the methods that you select (Crotty, 1998). Methodology seeks to help answer the question: Given my beliefs about the world, what would be the best method for studying it?

For example, if you believe that reality is fixed and identifiable, and that knowledge is formed by collecting reliable, objective data, your methodology is likely to include processes such as experiments, tests, and statistical analysis. If you believe that reality is contingent and subjective, shaped by individual experience/interpretation, and that knowledge is constructed via social negotiation/ interactions, your methodology may consist of interviews, observations, case studies, etc (Mack, 2010).

Each research paradigm has its own 'preferred' methodology. For example, positivism generally relies on quantitative methods; interpretivism leans towards qualitative methods; while critical theory may adopt a quantitative-qualitative combination to address oppression, hypotheses regarding how to effect change are also made (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011).

By selecting a methodology that aligns with your beliefs about the world, you can plan your research in a manner that is coherent and meaningful. This method takes into consideration how data will be gathered, the choice and use of data collection tools, and the data analysis approaches which fit your needs (Scotland, 2012).

3.2.2 Overview of Research Paradigm/ Worldviews

A research paradigm is a basic stance or frame of reference that shapes researchers' understanding of the social world and informs their studies. Thomas Kuhn coined the term paradigm in 1970. He defined paradigm as a set of common assumptions, values and practices that constitute a community of scholars. A paradigm embodies the general orientation or worldview of a researcher (Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006). Since Kuhn, the concept of the paradigm has evolved to encompass not only the underlying beliefs held by researchers but also the decisions regarding the study topic, research practices, and the interpretation of research findings (Bryman, 2004; Creswell, 2009a; Guba and Lincoln, 1994).

Furthermore, after examining qualitative research methodologies and the academic societies that underpin them, thought was given to the four key worldviews that shape different research paradigms. Although these worldviews are often discussed

in the context of mixed-methods studies, they are also highly relevant to qualitative studies. The following board summarises the key sections of these four worldviews as defined by Creswell (2014).

Post-positivism	Constructivism / Social Constructivism
Determination Reductionism Empirical observation and measurement Theory verification	Understanding Multiple participants' perspectives Social and historical construction Theory generation (not necessarily in all studies)
Transformative / Postmodernism	Pragmatism
Political Power- and justice-oriented Collaborative Change-oriented	Consequences of actions Problem-centred Pluralistic Real-world practice-oriented

Table 6: Key elements of four world views (Adapted from Creswell, 2014)

Therefore, I find this table exactly aligned with my understanding of the 4 different types of research philosophy, which are called the four worldviews.

Creswell (2014) highlights four principal worldviews: post-positivism, constructivism, transformational worldview, and pragmatism (Table 6). Aliyu and Adamu (2015) categorised positivism as a self-leading, autonomous, and objective presence of truth, a research paradigm founded on the ontological principle and doctrine that truth exists independently of the observer. It is repeatedly devoted to analysing causal links, exploring linkages, and forecasting events based on countable results.

Post-positivism originated from positivism in the mid-19th century (McGregor and Murnane, 2010; Scotland, 2012). It is termed post-positivism because it addresses the intellectual developments that followed positivism (Creswell, 2014). It challenges the conventional notion of absolute knowledge and acknowledges that definitive knowledge cannot be asserted when examining human behaviour and deeds. Post-positivism is associated with quantitative research, in which the researcher bases conclusions on principles of determinism, reductionism, empirical observation and measurement, and theory verification (Slife and Williams, 1995). In the scientific method, positivist researchers begin with a hypothesis, gather evidence to validate or refute it, make modifications, and conduct further tests as needed (Creswell, 2014). Guba (1990) elucidates that while positivists assertthat reality can be comprehended and captured, post-positivists contend that reality can only be approximated and never fully grasped. Second, constructivism, or social constructivism, frequently integrated with interpretivism, is primarily associated with qualitative research. This perspective is derived from understanding phenomena, participants' diverse viewpoints on social interactions, individual histories, and the formulation of theories (Creswell, 2014). In contrast to the postpositivist approach, which begins with a theory, constructivism involves the collection and analysis of evidence, from which a theory may then be inductively formulated (Creswell, 2014; Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017).

Third, the transformative worldview, typically associated with qualitative research, is shaped by political considerations. The methodology seeks to enhance the social sphere by comprehending individuals' experiences of empowerment, marginalisation,

hegemony, patriarchy, and various injustices (Creswell, 2014; Mertens, 2005). Transformative research amplifies participants' voices and seeks to rectify social injustices by addressing social, economic, and political challenges (Creswell, 2014; Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). Finally, pragmatism is primarily associated with mixed-methods research. This perspective emphasises outcomes over processes. Pragmatism prioritises practical effectiveness over the pursuit of metaphysical truths (Creswell, 2014). Tran (2016) asserted that pragmatism can transform observations into theories and subsequently evaluate those theories through actions(Singh,2024).

Therefore, this study is placed within a constructivist worldview and implements a phenomenological approach to explore and understand participants lived experiences. The rationale for adopting constructivism is discussed in Section 3.3, while the phenomenological approach underpinning the study is explained in detail later in this chapter.

Rationale for chosen research philosophies

Constructivism

Constructivism can be positioned as an epistemological position that does not view reality as something to find objectively, but rather objectively experienced and created through human perception, social interaction and contextual understanding (Crotty, 1998). Similarly, according to Satish Chand, Constructivism is an important educational theory that teachers use to help students acquire knowledge. Constructivism assumes that people construct their own knowledge; experiences will form their view of reality. Constructivist theory holds that learning occurs when students connect new ideas to their prior conceptions.

Thus, students take the knowledge they already possess as a starting point and build on it when they learn something new. The teacher becomes the facilitator in the educational process, and this is why constructivism is known for learner-centred education. Learning in a constructivist classroom is viewed as constructed, active, reflective, collaborative, inquiry-based, and evolving. (Chand, 2023, p. 1). Furthermore, Bada and Olusegun (2015) describe that constructivist theories of learning have their origins in the work of Dewey (1929), Bruner (1961), Vygotsky (1962), and Piaget (1980). There have been many descriptions of the implications of constructivist theory for instructional developers, including by Bednar, Cunningham, Duffy, and Jonassen (1992) and von Glasersfeld (1995), that emphasise that learning outcomes should focus on how knowledge is constructed, and learning objectives should originate from meaningful tasks with specific purposes. von Glasersfeld (1995) also argues that learning is more than a stimulus-response behaviour; rather, it is a process that requires self-regulation and the construction of conceptual frameworks through reflective and abstract thinking. It is important to note there are multiple forms of constructivism, and although there are many similarities between the perspectives, there are also significant differences (Bada and Olusegun, 2015).

Constructivism argues knowledge is constructed from the meaning that arises of people's lived experiences. This is particularly relevant when considering educational phenomena that are inherently fluid, context-bound, and culturally situated. It is closely related to social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978) that builds on this epistemological orientation because social constructivism or constructivism means that, as individuals, we do not develop knowledge in isolation; we do so through

socially mediated, culturally and linguistically contextualised experiences. For educational researchers, especially when examining reforms such as Nepal's Secondary Education Examination (SEE), constructivism, or social constructivism, is an immensely useful framework for understanding how students and teachers experience, engage with, interpret, negotiate, and make meaning of the policies being enacted in the real world.

Moreover, according to Priyamvada (2018), there has been considerable interest in a constructivist approach to education in recent years, largely due to its learner-centred emphasis, active engagement, and knowledge-building. Clearly, constructivism can be closely associated with qualitative methodology, which does not measure or quantify but seeks to understand. The use of interviews, focus groups, and observations, in which participants can express their perceptions in their own terms, captures the complex realities of classroom life. This is especially important in contexts like Nepal, where educational reforms such as SEE are not simply 'technical' changes but social 'interventions' that can have dramatic consequences for learners and teachers.

In Nepal, constructivist research has previously demonstrated its potential. For example, Bhattarai and Basnet (2022) implemented a constructivist view of teaching-learning processes; they explained the effects of control and discipline on learning experiences and how students' voices echo broader cultural restraints (Bhattarai and Basnet, 2021). Likewise, Mitchell (2018) and Bhattarai (2019) developed a constructivist grounded theory of teacher narratives in rural Nepal, foreground processing how meaning was shaped and sustained within the context (Mitchell, 2018).

Constructivism offers several advantages for studies, particularly when examining how reforms are implemented and what education is like for students and teachers. Constructivism permitscultural awareness, as it allows researchers to study with the norms, values, and discourses of the local ethos for example, as Pokhrel (2020) notes, educational training in Nepal is rooted within a socio-cultural environment that does not provide itself easily to universalised interpretations.

Moreover, studies within a constructivist model emphasise voice and agency, with teachers and students considered co-constructors of knowledge and import rather than reflexive issues, thereby allowing for more empowerment of persons who are generally silenced and omitted from being heard. Ultimately, constructivist research is variable and responsive, and energetic and changing contexts can be intentional, such as the SEE. Reform, for which it is less suitable to use traditional experimental or qualitative methods (Patton, 2015; Charmaz, 2014).

Lastly, constructivist research places value on depth over breadth, and thus delivers an opportunity for researchers to inspect and understand complex and nuanced

educational experiences that may go unnoticed when pursuing generalizability through quantitative methods.

This is illustrated in Shrestha and Acharya's (2024) exploration of science learning in Nepali secondary schools, which demonstrated how constructivist practices enhanced student engagement and autonomy during lessons (Shrestha and Acharya, 2024). The 30 students of the two Kathmandu schools were split into an experimental and a control group.

The experimental group was trained using a constructivist methodology, and the control group was instructed using traditional methods. The data from pre- and post-test statistical analyses revealed that the use of a constructivist approach to instructionresultedin significantlyhigherstudent achievement in science compared to the control group.

Constructivism is the best fit for this study

First, my epistemic stance is important because my understanding of schooling in Nepal is shaped by a background that differs noticeably from my experiences of education in the UK. A constructivist position therefore reassures me to distinguish that my own understanding is placed, while also giving importance to the meanings and understandings constructed by participants within their own educational contexts.

Second, this study is focused not simply with whether the SEE reform has succeeded or failed, but with how it is experienced by those directly affected by it.

Even though educational reforms may be only introduced through policy level, however their experience can be different in each applied schools and individuals like students and teachers according to the context give their resources and everyday realism. Therefore, constructivism is appropriate it explores these multiple understandings of the SEE reform rather than finding it as a single objective reality.

Third, my exploration or studies aids to the promising essence of constructivist scholarship in South Asian education contexts. Constructivist methods to research have also been used to study Kandel (2022), constructed constructivist epistemology by inspecting teacher learning; Kandel (2022) suggests personal and shared stories

are used as key forms of communication in some of Nepal's public-school classrooms.

Constructivism and Research Design

The epistemological and ontological aspects of constructivism informed every aspect of my research design. Accordingly, I adopted a phenomenological approach, which is discussed in the following section. I selected data collection methods that must support dialogue, flexibility and reflection on my experiences studying a new curriculum. I conceptualised the semi-structured interviewing as a conversation, rather than an interrogation, because I included the interactional patterns. I used semi-structured interviews because they align methodologically with the ontological assumptions of constructivism in a conceptual, flexible, and reciprocal way, as is expected in research in Nepal, where storytelling, metaphors, and daily dialogue are the primary modalities of communication (Khadka, 2007).

In conclusion, I emphasise that constructivism is not only an epistemological position to adopt but an epistemological commitment that resonates with me as a researcher who seeks to amplify the marginalised voice. It provided a strong platform to explore examples of the actions taken by students and teachers in Nepal in relation to interpreting, resisting, or adopting to SEE reform. In relation to the other paradigms, this qualitative study drew heavily upon the strengths of constructivism in cultural contextualisation, richness of understanding.

Therefore, from a constructive point of view, realities are formed through human experiences, actions, and interpretations, rather than as fixed truths or an objective state of being (Crotty, 1998; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017). Meaning is constructed in context and through dialogue, and individuals actively participate in the meaning-making process. This epistemological stance permits an inquiry that privileges participants' individual and situated understandings of the world around them.

3.1.2 Phenomenological Approach

As the aim of the study is to investigate how the student's teacher has experienced SEE in Nepal and a phenomenological approach is particularly appropriate. Phenomenology explores phenomena as they are lived and experienced by individuals, before they are theorized (van Manen,2016).

This method captures the essence of the participants' experiences, as expressed by the participants themselves, while also providing a deeper understanding of how people interpret significant experiences or changes in their lives (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). A fundamental concept of phenomenology is epoché, or bracketing, whereby the researcher seeks to put aside or critically reflect on ingrained prejudices and beliefs to attend more closely to participants' perspectives (Tufford and Newman, 2012).

This allows the lived experience to come to the forefront and provides a more authentic representation of participants' realities.

As this study explores a policy shift in national education, phenomenology enables me to examine not only what is experienced, but also how it is emotionally and cognitively processed by individuals, making it particularly appropriate for researching changes, adaptations, and impact in education systems (Finlay, 2009).

Despite the availability of their various theoretical approaches, a positivist paradigm would not be appropriate because it is based on objective measures that may overlook the social and cultural meaning-making processes of the participants. Positivist research seeks to ascertain generalisable truths and therefore often uses quantitative instruments, which would not capture the rich nuances required for understanding the situated experience of educational change. Though post-positivism provides somewhat more flexibility, in its continued emphasison testing hypothesis, objective observation means that it would not suit the relational and interpretive nature of this study.

Positivism is a research paradigm based on the notion that reality is objective, measurable, and independent of human perception of what it is. Positivism prioritises empirical observation, hypothesis testing, and generalisability (Bryman, 2016). In general terms, positivism has been the dominant paradigm within the natural sciences, but it has also had some influence within areas of educational research that emphasise quantifiable outcomes.

However, positivism has understandably attracted criticism for its imposing narrow limits on the exploration of complex social phenomena, with respect to human experience, emotion, and context. Critics that argue positivism oversimplifies reality by reducing human activity to variables and measurement; in doing so, it may overlook the subjective meanings individuals ascribe to their lived experience

(Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). For example, when considering educational reform, positivism would not be able to adequately capture how students or teachers feel, interpret, and navigate change, a gap that qualitative, interpretative paradigms like constructivism may seek to address.

3.2.2 Study Area



Figure 2: Chitwan District of Nepal

The above figure shows the geographical location of Chitwan District within Nepal. This research took place in Chitwan district, which is in Bagmati Province in the southern central part of Nepal. Chitwan is also one of the fastest-developing areas within Nepal and is an area that has a mix of urban municipalities as well as

rural municipalities. Moreover, critical reflection has explained and justified the choice below

3.3 Critical Reflection on the Choice of Chitwan District

Chitwan District was chosen as the research location because it provided an appropriate background for exploring students' and teachers' experiences of the SEE grading system within a manageable geographical area while also allowing engagement with differing educational contexts. Chitwan contains both towns and villages, and a socially and culturally diverse population, making it possible to access schools serving different groups rather than limiting the study to a single setting. Official census data also reveal variation in educational participation and attainment at district and local levels in Nepal, strengthening the importance of examining educational experiences within their geographical and social contexts (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2014). However, I recognise that selecting one district unavoidably shaped the perspectives represented in this research. Experience of implementing the SEE system in Chitwan may differ from that in Nepal's geographically remote mountain districts or other regions where educational resources, accessibility, and socioeconomic conditions vary considerably. Therefore, Chitwan was selected as a microcosm of Nepal's social and cultural diversity, rather than on the assumption that it represented Nepal as a whole, providing a specific context through which students' and teachers' experiences of the grading system could be explored in depth. This geographical focus provided the depth required for the qualitative study while also necessitating caution when considering the transferability of the findings beyond Chitwan.



Figure 3: Detail view of Chitwan District of Nepal

The above figure provides a more detailed view of Chitwan District, showing its municipalities and administrative boundaries.

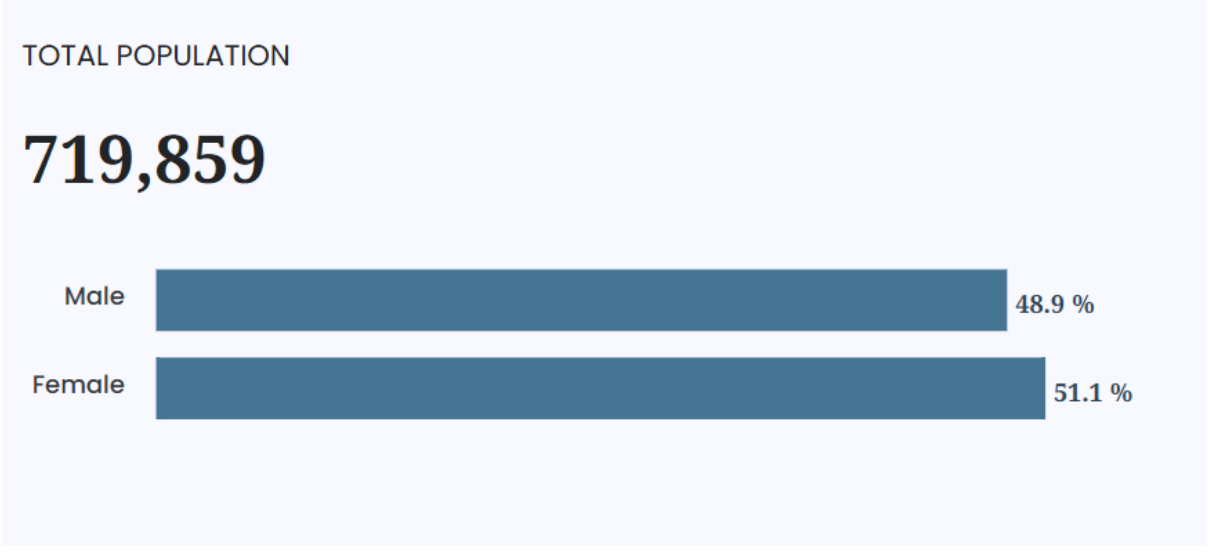


Figure 4: Chitwan-Consensus, 2021

Chitwan district has a total population of 719859, with 51.1% female and 48.9% male (NSO, 2023). The average family size is approximately 4 people.

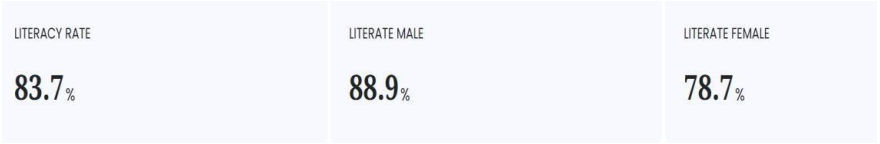


Figure 5: Literacy Rate of the male and female population in Chitwan district (NSO,2023)

Compared to many other districts nearby Chitwan for e.g., Makwanpur 77.8%, Nawalparasi, Parsa 69.1%, Bara 64.5% (NSO,2023). Chitwan has relatively higher literacy rate. To illustrate, the overall literacy rate of Chitwan is 83.7% categorising 88.9% males and 78.7% females (NSO,2023).

So, therefore this Chitwan represents microcosm of diverse social and cultural background of people with relatively higher rate of literacy rate. Therefore, both the urban and rural settings are represented by Chitwan. However, for example, Khairahani Municipality is more representative of the urban environment than the rural area within Kalika Municipality. The population of Khairahni Municipality is estimated at approximately 67,000. The population of Kalika Municipality was estimated at about 54,000 (National Statistics Office, 2023).

Category	Population
Early childhood	19268
Primary education	142070
Lower secondary	106546
Upper secondary	78027
SLC	63163
Intermediate	92586
Graduate	30127
Post graduate equiv. & above	13288
Other	571

Table 8: Educational attainment in Chitwan District (NSO,2023)

Category	Population
Early childhood	1817
Primary education	12395
Lower secondary	9851
Upper secondary	7261
SLC	6092
Intermediate	8407
Graduate	2168
Post graduate equiv. and above	945
Other	15

Table 9: Educational attainment in Khairahani Municipality (NSO,2023)

Category	Population
Early childhood	1551
Primary education	12435
Lower secondary	8344
Upper secondary	5012
SLC	3510
Intermediate	4705
Graduate	884
Post graduate equiv. and above	364
Other	16

Table 10: Educational attainment in Kalika Municipality (NSO,2023)

The above tables numbered from 6 to 8 represented the detailed education profile of two municipalities where the participants were selected for this study. Therefore, the above data shows both the municipalities have considerable number of school age population and diverse educational backgrounds which was suitable for these locations for exploring SEE experience of students 'and teachers. Having outlined the research design and the overall research plan for this study, the next section of the report explains the specific methodologies that will be applied to gather the information required for this investigation

3.4 Research Methods

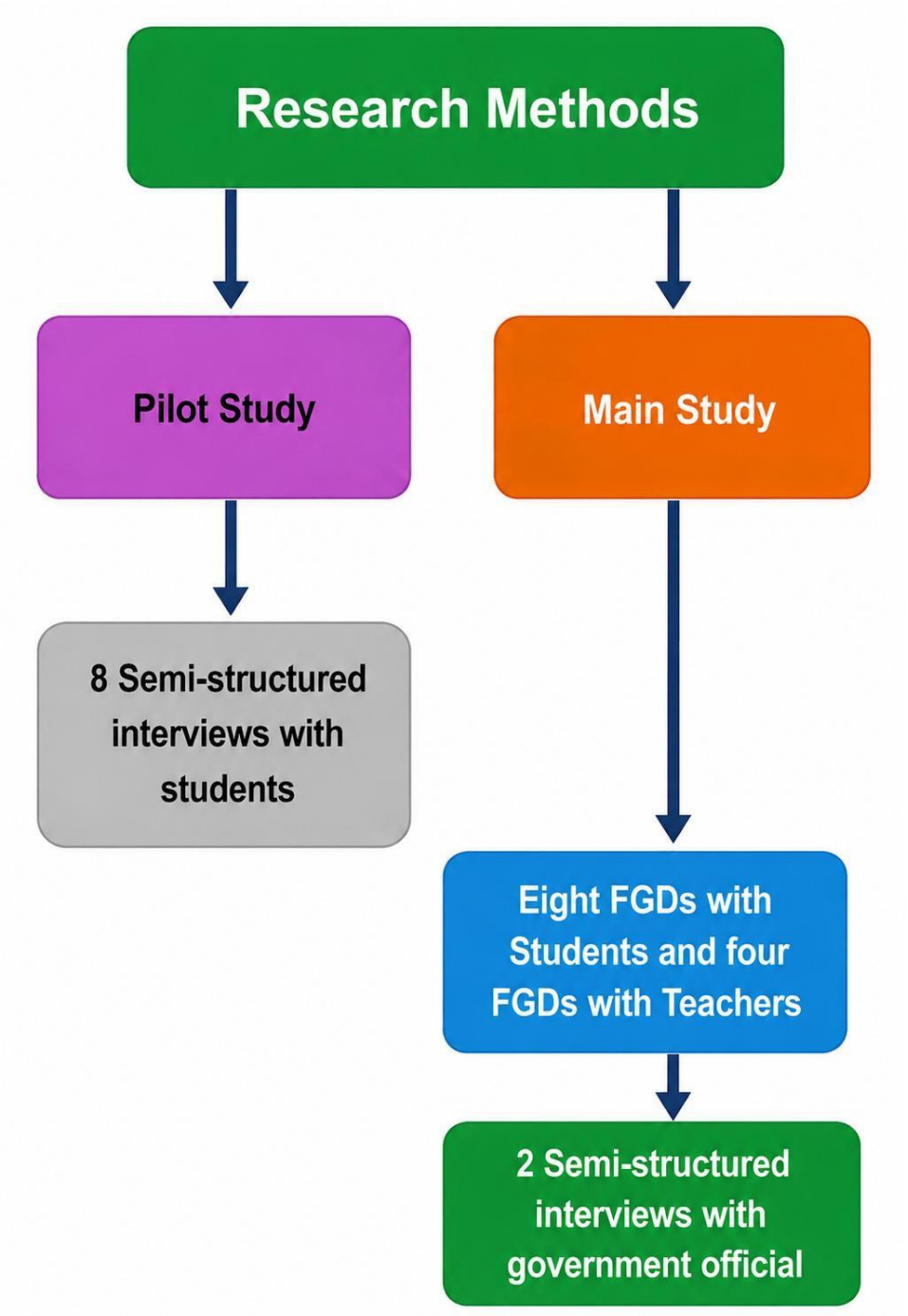


Figure 6: Research Methods Employed in this study

In general terms, my overall research methodology is illustrated by figure 6. For this research study, I completed it in two stages: a pilot stage and then the main study. My pilot was based on conducting semi-structured interviews with 8 students. These were necessary to help refine my tools/methods/procedures prior to undertaking my main research study. My main research study consisted of 8 focus groups with students, 4 focus groups with teachers, and semi-structured interviews with the District Education Officer (DEO) and the Chief/City Education Officer (CGO). Having outlined the overall research design, I now explain an overview of sampling strategies I studied and used to select participants for both the pilot and the main study.

3.6.1 Sampling strategies

Sampling is an integral part of all research; it is the process of selecting a sample of people from a population to infer information about the population. Good sampling techniques will improve the reliability and generalizability of the findings. One of the most commonly used probability sampling strategies is simple random sampling, in which every unit in the population has an equal chance of being selected. Simple random sampling reduces selection bias, and the independent sampling of each participant (e.g., each participant being selected using a random number table or random number reduces the potential for researcher bias (Bryman, 2016). Probability sampling techniques include another very common technique called systematic sampling.

3.6.1.1 Systematic sampling is another form of probability sampling, whereby participants are chosen at predetermined intervals from a list, ordered by some method of identifying individuals. Once the first person is randomly selected, every k-th person will be included. Systematic random sampling is easy for researchers to do, and if the list is randomly ordered, it ensures they will gain almost the same benefits as simple random sampling (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

Systematic sampling is an accessible method of probability sampling; however, there are many other ways researchers can use to ensure that each subgroup in a population is adequately represented through sampling.

3.6.1.2 Stratified sampling is conducted as a way of enhancing sample representation, especially if the population is heterogeneous, different, or if thereare practically important differences. The population is divided into meaningful strata

or subgroups (age level, gender, education level, etc.), and participants are randomly sampled from each stratum in the same proportions. Therefore, stratified sampling allows for representation from the various levels of the population (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2019).

The geographic distribution of a population and the goals of the research will determine whether researchers use additional sampling methods alongside stratified sampling.

3.6.1.3 Cluster sampling is also often used when the population is not located within one geographic area. In this method, the population is organised into clusters (generally by geographic location), and a random sample of clusters is selected. Clusters may introduce greater variability into your results, especially if they are not homogeneous (Neuman, 2014). Non-probability methods (e.g., convenience sampling) focus on people who are available (because they are easier to access). However, attention to this will introduce bias because it does not provide a good representation of the whole population. Convenience sampling is often used in exploratory research or when time and resources are very limited (Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim, 2016). This research focused on the Chitwan district of Nepal, which is known for its proactive educational environment (Ministry of Finance, 2018). The study sought to establish the views of students and teachers regarding the new grading system for the new SEE exam. Therefore, in both the pilot and main study, stratified random and purposive sampling were used. My sampling frame was the official symbol number (used to identify SEE examination candidates), which provided an identifiable list of students. Using a "symbol number", one was selected at a time without replacement to ensure every student had the same probability of being selected.

The research design for this study required qualitative methods to capture participants' lived experiences in a meaningful, transformative, and empathetic way. Based on this, I utilised two qualitative methods: semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). The selection of these qualitative methods was based on their methodological appropriateness for this type of research and their ability to access participants' lived experiences. These methods were considered suitable because they offered the potential to generate rich,

meaningful, and in-depth data while enabling participants to share their experiences in a supportive, respectful, and empathetic environment.

However, in the pilot study, only semi-structured interviews were conducted, and in the main study, both semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were used to collect data.

3.4.2 Sampling in this Research Study

A groupof schoolswith someeducational consistencyina local areawas selected for the study in the Chitwan District, Nepal, and the researchers sought to explore the perspectives of students, teachers, and education officials on the recently commissioned SEE grading system. Stratified Random Sampling was used to get a broad and diverse range of student perspectives, ensuring their equal chance of selection, and it was not limited to any group of students. Purposive Sampling was also used to obtain detailed insights from teachers and policy stakeholders, who were deliberately selected based on their experience, knowledge, and job role.

3.4.2.1 Students – Stratified Random Sampling

In both the pilot and main study, stratified random sampling was used to select student research participants. The selection frame consisted of the official symbol number assigned to SEE examination candidates, like assigned social security numbers. These assigned symbol numbers were selected randomly from the given list of these numbers. So that each student had an equal probability of being selected in the research study.

To improve gender balance and reduce potential unconscious bias, the selected student symbol numbers were organised by gender, and school headteachers used school lists to check the rostered current students, facilitating the random selection process. So, the research sampling could be more clearly evidenced; the headteachers were asked to go through the ethics process. This was carefully constructed to provide assurance that it was fair and diverse, whilst also considering ethical issues related to informed consent. Further, given that Chitwan is a region with urban and rural educational settings, it was also helpful in achieving contextual balance and provided stronger detail for considering the student experience across differing student contexts.

Stratified random sampling was a particularly sound practice for the student group in part because it supported the legitimacy and fairness of the findings. Although the purpose was not statistical generalisation, having an unbiased cross-section of students provided greater confidence in the representativeness of their narratives, while also preventing the over-representation of the most readily available voices.

3.4.2.2. Teachers - Purposive Sample

The rationale for this is both philosophical and practical. From a phenomenological perspective, participants are selected based on their contributions to understanding the meaning and essence of the phenomenon: grading reform.

Teachers were selected using purposive sampling criteria; specifically, I was concerned with enlisting teachers with experience teaching both prior to and under the current SLC and SEE processes. The experiential difference was critical to illuminating how systemic reforms impacted school practices, teacher pedagogical adjustments, and teacher-student interactions.

Teachers were drawn from public and private schools to enhance the structural diversity of the education sector represented. Variables such as subject knowledge, years of teaching experience, and willingness to reflect on change were also considered.

Teachers, in this regard, are primarily sources of insider perceptions of gaps in implementation, resource constraints, and students' responses. In addition, they were interpretive sources of narratives about and insight into the phenomenon.

3.4.3 Government Officials - Purposive Sample

Two policy-level actors were included: DEO and a central government official. They were selected based on the critical roles they played in shaping, designing, and implementing the grading reform at the district and national levels. They were contacted via formal letters and provided information sheets on their participation, the research aims, how ethical principles would be upheld, and how informed consent would be obtained.

As these officials occupy a unique position that cannot be replicated, purposive sampling was not only justified but necessary. Each official account added macro-level policy context to the micro-level experiences of students and teachers and linked the intentions of education officials to educational realities.

3.5 Data Collection Strategy

The alignment between sampling strategy and data collection approaches is crucial in qualitative research. Given the phenomenological and constructivist stance of this study, the sampling process was designed to select participants who could provide genuine, reflective, and richly contextualised accounts of their lived experiences.

The pilot study (Student) used semi-structured interviews with stratified randomly selected students to verify the clarity of the interview protocol and to establish potential themes, whereas the main study used focus group discussions (students and teachers) to deepen the interpretive quality of the data.

Each methodology for student, teacher, and official participants was chosen using purposive or random sampling techniques, appropriate to the participant group. Paley (2001) notes the richness of data triangulation achieved through multi-level sampling, which enhances the trustworthiness of participant data. Multiple perspectives were also accessed across participants.

3.5.1 Semi-Structured Interviews (SSI)

Semi-structured interviews formed the basis of this qualitative study. These provided a good balance between standardisation (which structured interviews offer) and flexibility (which unstructured interviews allow). A semi-structured interview enabled me to generate both personal and professional views (as a stakeholder) from different layers of the educational landscape in Nepal, specifically, students (pilot study) and two high-level educational officials (main study), including a District Education Officer (DEO) and a Central Government Official (CGO).

In respect of the selection of this study's participants, including views from different levels of the educational hierarchy, from the classroom to the policy level, to capture a broader understanding of the system's phenomena. Participants of this study included students' teachers, the District Education Officer, and a Central Government Official (CGO). This also means cross-level inclusion, as the name suggests: the inclusion of different levels (hierarchy). Moreover, this provided a rich perspective on the SEE reform and how it has been received in practice within the education system. Although perspectives from government officials at the me so (DEO) and macro (CGO) levels were included to provide contextual

understanding, the study primarily focused on the lived experiences of teachers and students.

Similarly, using semi-structured interviews, I maintained a structure to identify key themes while still allowing participants to accept themes that emerged from their experiences and contexts (Denscombe, 2017). For students, during the pilot study phase, this method enabled exploration of their initial responses to be grading reform that might otherwise have been overlooked.

Furthermore, throughout the pilot study, Skype interviews using only the audio feature were conducted with students to help them feel comfortable speaking on audio rather than video. It included Year 11 students in the first semester of 2018 who had just passed SEE examinations. Students were selected using *stratified random sampling* to ensure representation of both male and female students. Separate lists of male and female students were provided to me, and each student was assigned a unique identification number based on their SEE symbol number (the number given to each student prior to their SEE exams). Participants were then randomly selected *from* each gender group, thereby reducing selection bias while ensuring balanced representation. The Skype interviews were arranged through designated gatekeepers at each participating school after institutional permission had been granted. Gatekeepers acted solely as intermediaries by informing the selected students about the study, distributing the participant information sheet and consent forms, confirming interview dates and times, and ensuring that each participant had access to an internet-enabled device and an active Skype account. A few randomly selected participants already had active Skype accounts; a few did not. They were guided by gatekeepers to sign up for one while maintaining all GDPR policy requirements for a Skype account. No participant was excluded or replaced due to a lack of access. The gatekeepers' only responsibilities were to facilitate recruitment, set up interviews, and provide technical support as needed, since the interviews were semi-structured. Gatekeepers were not present in the room where the discussion took place and had no access to the interview data. Students were left alone during the interviews and were asked to seek help from the gatekeeper only if technical assistance was required. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection commenced. Participant information sheets and consent forms were distributed through the gatekeepers,

and, after being signed by the participants (and parents/guardians where applicable), the completed consent forms were returned by post from Nepal to my supervisory team's postal address in the United Kingdom before any interviews took place. They were comfortable communicating in their own language, and data were collected in Nepali; later, they were transcribed and translated into English. The students appeared comfortable answering the questions and openly discussed the challenges and advantages of the new SEE examinations. Therefore, this approach not only confirmed participants' comfort and willingness to share their experiences accurately but also provided a strong foundation for a deeper evaluation of their perspectives through the semi-structured interview process.

Confidentiality was maintained during data collection, transcription, and analysis by assigning each participant an identification code rather than their real name. Consent forms, interview transcripts, and recordings were stored in password-protected computer files accessible only to the researcher.

Although participants received a certificate of appreciation acknowledging their voluntary participation, the certificate contained no information that could identify their interview responses or compromise their anonymity. Furthermore, participants were respectfully requested not to discuss the interview questions or their responses with friends or classmates until data collection was complete, to minimise the possibility of influencing other participants' views. Gatekeepers were involved only in facilitating recruitment and scheduling interviews and were not present during interviews or given access to the interview data, thereby further protecting participants' confidentiality and ensuring compliance with the ethical requirements of Liverpool John Moores University.

Furthermore, the DEO interview covered technical and operational detail in regard to SEE reform, (deployment of teachers, supervision of training, monitoring of school, institutional level quality assurance) while the CGO interview had a more institutional, top-down view and made apparent the political and strategic basis for changing the grading policy (perceived goals included improved fairness, transparent process of assessment, and alignment to the national development priorities).

Both interviews were conducted in Nepali, which facilitated informal, culturally oriented discussions. Revised interview prompts, reflecting knowledge gained from the pilot study, included probing items designed to elicit elaboration and clarification of ambiguous or technical statements. Ethical guidelines were carefully followed; people were given informed consent forms and information sheets before the interview, and efforts were made to ensure participants' anonymity, especially the CGO, whom I did not name but explicitly referenced upon request.

These conversations played an important role in reinforcing the study's phenomenological nature by providing an opportunity for participants to describe their experiences in their own terms. The semi-structured interviews also helped promote triangulation of data, which was important for ensuring validity and depth of analysis. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), triangulation across the vertical (policy to practice) and horizontal (peer group to peer group) could cover valuable information regarding the systemic level of reform. As an example, comparing the official language in government interviews with student and teacher perspectives re-located common with divergence especially in terms of how reform translates into classroom practices and student learning outcomes.

Along with the student and teacher focus group discussions, the semi-structured interviews with officials provided a coherent, methodologically sound, ethically responsive, and contextually rich approach to understanding how educational change is viewed and enacted across different layers of the education system.

3.5.2 Focus group discussions (FGD)

To understand the collective experiences of students and teachers who have used the SEE system, I conducted focus group discussions. FGDs have the advantage of enabling individuals to connect and think about issues in a fluid manner, and are useful for studying how individuals cope with collective problems or changes (Krueger and Casey, 2015).

In this main study, FGDs were particularly useful because they provide participants with a safe and comfortable space to express emotion, especially when peers motivated them to speak. In the FGDs, one of my main research strategies was to use probing questions to foster greater engagement and encourage deeper reflection. For example, we asked questions like "Do you agree?" What do you think about

this? Why or why not? This helped to elicit many voices and allowed those who did not speak to use their voices (Patton, 2002).

I createdseparate FGDs for boys and girls so each would feel safe and comfortable sharing, and so we could represent their ideas. Lee (2005) noted that teens often felt more uncomfortable discussing sensitive topics in a gender-based group. This was effective for my study.

Focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted in the second collection phase in four schools (two public schools and two private schools) located in Chitwan district in Nepal, including students who had just completed the Secondary Education Examination (SEE) and teachers who had taught in the reform period in both the previous SLC and current SEE system. Based on our Phase 1 fieldwork, I perceived that subject was much more expressive, discursive, and relaxed in a group than in an individual interview. In a collectivist cultural context like Nepal, participants in groups often have greater confidence, greater freedom to be discursive, and richer reflexivity (Lee, 2005).

3.3.5.1 Students

The student FGDs were gender-themed to create safe and inclusive spaces for conversation. The groups were with 6-8 students and had discussions in Nepali to be culturally and linguistically accessible. The purpose was to capture how the students experienced and interpreted the changed grading scheme, as parallels were sought for the phenomenological goal of understanding lived experience (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009).

I facilitated by utilising probing questions, such as "Do you agree?" Or why or why not? This created space for quieter students and encouraged the students to elaborate, due to the group's implicit nature. Whilst there were themes shared by the private- and public-school students (an explanation of the school's grading criteria), the private-school students tended to elaborate more. This is likely due to their privilege and experience from discussion-based learning (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018).

The group conversations in relation to the individual produced collective knowledge, which further added to meaningful triangulation for comparison when collecting teachers' accounts and, when possible, administrators' or policymakers' accounts (Denzin, 2012).

3.3.5.2 Teachers

A similar FGD format was used with the teachers, and these FGDs focused on their experience implementing the new grading scheme. As implementers of the policy, teachers could tell how the reform was affecting their pedagogical and classroom practices, as well as their overall workloads. The FGDs allowed a collegial space for reflection upon adaptations and challenges.

I used open-ended and reflective probing questions during the FGD, such as: Can someone buildupon that point? Or you mentioned workload increasing — what does that look like in practice? These probing questions allowed for extended responses and to assist with the groups when multiple voices spoke simultaneously. The responses from the teachers added emotional and professional layers to the findings, exemplifying how they top-down preparations their formal roles in their everyday practice (Van Manen, 2016). The teachers' contributions enhanced the phenomenological narrative by explicating not only the visible variables relating to reform, but the implicit variables connected to teachers' professional, identity, and agency. When the teachers' responses were triangled with the students and policymakers' contributions, they illustrated both convergence and divergences on how the different stakeholders of the educational reform negotiated educational changes (Denzin, 2012).

3.6 Data Analysis Process

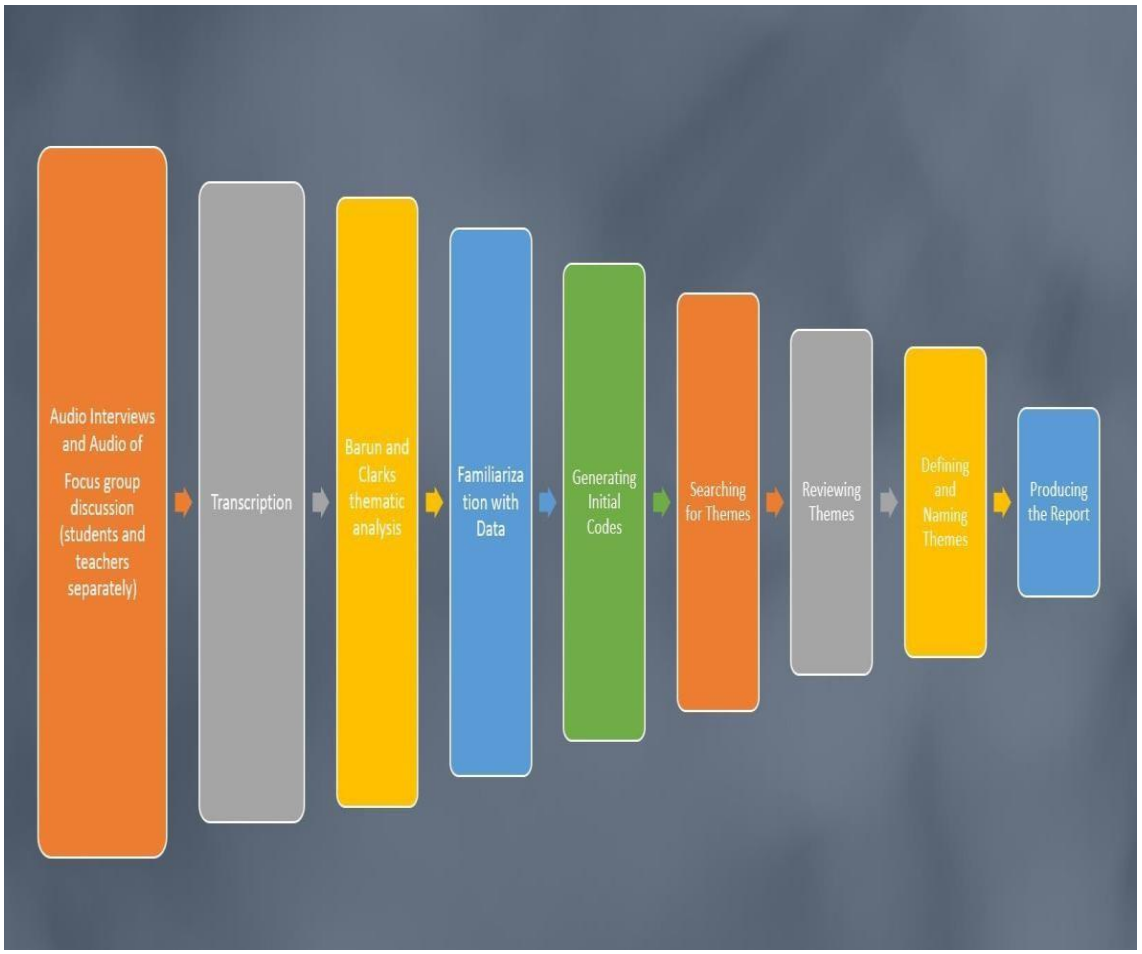


Figure A: Flow chart of the data analysis process

3.6.1 Thematic Analysis

After transcription and translation, I applied Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis approach to analyse the data in both the pilot and the main study. These are the processes involved:

1. Familiarising myself with the data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

Thematic analysis allowed me to move between individual and group data, identifying both shared experiences and contrasting viewpoints across student,

teacher, and official narratives. Themes were refined through repeated reading and cross-comparison between public- and private-school participants, highlighting subtle yet meaningful differences in how reforms were experienced.

This approach enabled the development of findings that are both analytically rigorous and true to participants' lived experiences, in line with the research's philosophical orientation.

The adoption of Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework is based on its systematic, theoretically flexible approach and transparency in recognising and clarifying patterns of implication within qualitative data. Their six-phase model provides both structure and flexibility, allowing researchers to move between data-led and conceptual interpretations (Braun and Clarke, 2013; Terry et al., 2017). This adjustability was vital for this study, which aimed to examine students and teachers' lived experiences in the context of grading reform in Nepal. Since the strict model of grounded theory, which is a classical model driven by the generation of theory which is grounded in the detail of specific cases, Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis allowable for the twin identification of separate meanings as well as shared patterns of meaning across participant groups (Clarke, Braun and Hayfield, 2015). The ontological and epistemological source of the structure is well associated with a constructivist and phenomenological perception supporting this research. Braun and Clarke (2006) state that impact is co-constructed through a process of spontaneous interpretation, rather than by detecting an objective truth.

3.6.1.1 Thematic analysis in pilot study

For the pilot study phase, thematic analysis was used as the primary analytic approach. Thematic analysis was selected as a simple, methodologically robust, and flexible approach for analytic engagement with complex qualitative data. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis as a commonly used method of identifying, analysing and interpreting patterns of meaning (themes) within qualitative data in a systematic way. Thematic analysis aligned well with this research study's phenomenological direction, providing presence/space for the participant voice while permitting consideration of broader conceptual insights.

Thematic analysis was first applied to the semi-structured interview data from the students in the pilot study. Following transcription and translation, I conducted an initial phase of manual coding and read line by line to consider every piece of

information as if it were between the participant and me. This discussion influences the ontological and epistemological perception of this research, in which recognition is assumed of the fact that the participants' experience of grading is constructed by the social experiences, realities and recognised position of those participating in them. The application of this is that thematic analysis does not simply aim to classify repeated themes but succeeds in a deeper engagement with the soul of participants' knowledge, a goal of phenomenological research (Moustakas, 1994; Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). Moreover, thematic analysis is a widely used and validated technique in educational research in South Asian and Nepalese contexts, thus highlighting its relevance to context. For example, Kafle (2020) and Singh (2025) employed qualitative outlines to examine teachers' and students' perceptions of Nepal's letter-grading system, thereby highlighting the need for flexible outlines to capture varied experiences and social understandings. In a similar vein, Dawadi (2020) or Shah (2021) successfully employed Braun and Clarke's technique to examine informative experiences in Nepal, demonstrating its capacity to balance methodological attention. Outside the Nepalese context, however, Haleem and Asghar (2024) applied thematic analysis to a case study of grading experiences in Pakistan, thereby highlighting the importance of thematic analysis in the region's decision-making for educational reform. In conclusion, the variety of perspectives selected above would suggest that Braun and Clarke's spontaneous thematic analysis provides a viable and robust means of examining the density of students' and teachers lived educational experiences in what is fundamentally a change process in educational reform.

I collated my early codes, which were clusters of units based on similar concepts or emotional tone. Within the context of the pilot study, the analysis served as a preliminary phase of sense-making and was useful in supporting revisions to the data collection instruments used in the primary study. For example, emergent themes regarding confusion about the grading system and differences in assessment expectations regarding interview protocols and probing efforts were revised as part of the pilot analysis.

3.6.1.1 Thematic analysis for the main study

For the main study, I applied a more structured and detailed version of thematic analysis across all data sources: i.e., interviews with the District Education Officer

and Central Government Official and focus group data from students and teachers. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework were used to facilitate the process.

The coordination of data began with familiarisation, in which the transcripts of all the interviews were read and reread to become deeply familiar with their content. Through this process, reflective memos were constructed that captured the unfolding ideas, thoughts, and impressions. Subsequently, the creation of codes was commenced, again this was manually and inductively done, allowing the data to create its own developing meaning and patterns, as opposed to enforcing meanings and patterns which occurred from a previously recognised theoretical framework. Once the codes were established, themes were derived by collectively aggregating recounted coded segments, thus establishing broad themes that captured similar meanings across the data set. The identified themes were then concisely assessed and processed, ensuring consistency both within the themes and across the whole data set. Accordingly, the subjects confirmed that they accurately represented the participants' perspective. In the defining and naming stage, an effort was required to simplify each theme, thereby confirming that they clearly denoted distinct, articulated themes. Lastly, in writing the report, the themes were linked to the research questions and the existing literature, which helped embed the analysis.

What was particularly powerful about the thematic analysis with this study is the method's ability to accommodate varied data sources and voices across multiple stakeholders. Thematic analysis allowed the facility of movement between both the individual and group-level insights, with comparisons drawn across students, teachers, and policy officials. For example, the analysis illuminated multiple points of both convergence and divergence in the grading reform experience between both public and private school students and between frontline teachers, and national level decision- makers.

Additionally, it provided some means of cross-case analysis by bringing attention to differences in contexts and appreciating the rich descriptive and detailed elements of individual lived experience. Using thematic analysis helped to draw distinctions of varying subtlety, yet significance when emphasizing articulated differences regarding (for example) pedagogical adaptation between public and private, or students' perceived fairness of the reform. Specifically, this level of

interpretive granularity was critical to remaining true to the phenomenological nature of lived experience, while also moving on broader implications in relation to educational policy and practice.

The data of all participants were thoroughly anonymized, and ethical protocols were scrupulously observed throughout the process. The thematic analysis was not treated mechanically but sensitively and reflexively as an iterative and interpretive practice. After engaging with and revisiting the data several times, and further considering the various layers of meaning, the story of the findings was analytically rigorous, yet faithful to the voices of participants.

3.6.2 Data Triangulation

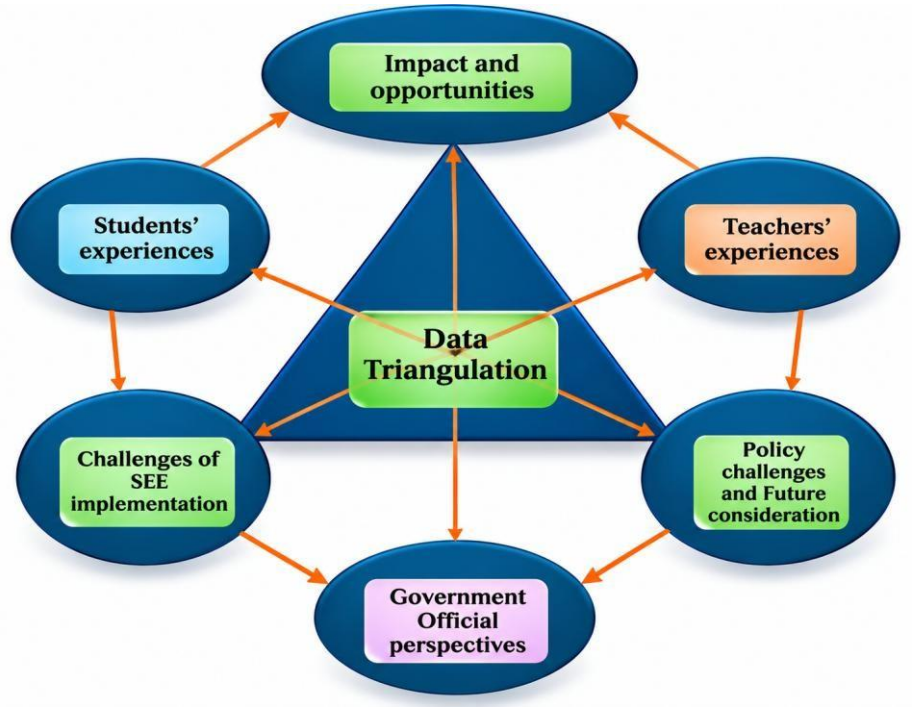


Figure 7: Data Triangulation

The above figure shows the diagram and how the data triangulation has been conducted in this study. semi-structured interviews were an essential element of the study's plan for data triangulation, which aimed to enhance the study's credibility, rigour, and validity of the study findings. Triangulation means examining a phenomenon from multiple perspectives (data sources, methodologies, and theoretical lenses) to cross-check results and reduce bias (Denzin 2012). The study used three aspects of triangulation:

As one example, the CGO's insights have been triangulated using teacher and student data to understand how national policy intentions for grading were articulated through school-level implementation. Thus, my study has become source triangulation. The triangulation of data not only contributed analytical rigour but also surfaced instances of divergence between policy and lived experience, strengthening the study's interpretive contribution to the field by deepening understanding of these experiences.

In summary, the semi-structured interviews served not only as a standalone method to sample insight but also served to support data triangulation, which both further support the credibility of the study and confirm the analytical rigour of the study.

3.6.2 Combining Methods for Depth and Balance

This study employed a multi-method qualitative approach, incorporating semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) to achieve both individual and collective depth, thereby contributing to data triangulation. Semi-structured interviews provided rich, individual narratives from key decision-makers, offering specificity and a policy-level perspective, while FGDs provided accounts from multiple study participants who were more directly situated within the SEE system. This method enabled a discussion of the lived experiences of those engaging with SEE reforms and how those reforms were both perceived and experienced.

Together, the use of different qualitative methods provided depth to the study, which explored the intention behind educational reforms as well as the realities of the educational reforms themselves. This design aligns well with both phenomenology, as phenomenologists support a comprehensive and reflective understanding of lived experience (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009), and constructivism, which views knowledge as co-constructed through social interaction and shaped by context.

The value of qualitative data from this research comes from it being able to explore personal experiences and viewpoints which cannot be understood through the analysis of grades or statistics alone. This will be especially valuable in terms of the current educational reforms taking place in Nepal since both student and teacher accounts could provide evidence as to how education policies are experienced by

individuals and thus offer an additional perspective that is relevant to policy makers and other education stakeholders.

Both semi-structured interviews and FGDs were implemented ethically and thoughtfully. All interviews and FGDs were conducted in either Nepali based on the participant's preference. Each interview/FGD was recorded (with informed consent), transcribed, anonymised, and securely stored to protect the confidentiality of the participant(s) and to comply with the ethical principles of qualitative research. Throughout the process, I remained attentive to participant comfort and trust in me, both as a researcher and a participant observer, which resonated with me as an ethical qualitative researcher. In conclusion, the combination of these methods not only served to build methodological rigour in this study but also helped create a more inclusive space where the study participants could meaningfully engage in a respectful manner toward the PSE (Post- secondary education) and each other. What follows is an overview of how these methods were deployed in the pilot and main studies, with ethical considerations addressed in a separate section later in this chapter.

3.7 Pilot Study Process

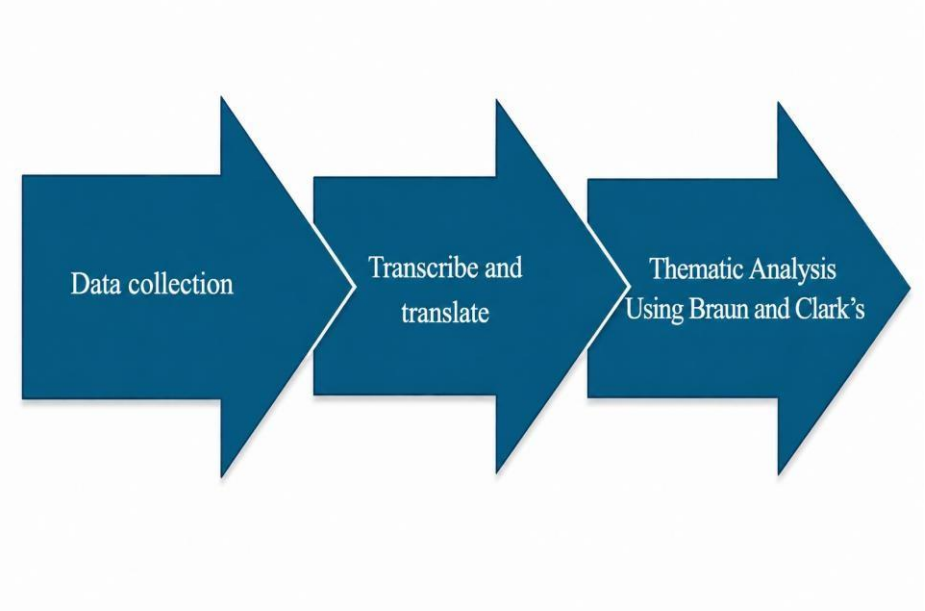


Figure 8: Pilot Study-Data interpretation process

The pilot study originated as a small-scale testing to measure the feasibility, clarity, and real-world application of the investigation tools, with the goal of purifying both the data collection process and the structure of interview forward of the main study. Organising a pilot is an important step in qualitative research, particularly when operational with young participants, as it supports identify any unexpected challenges and confirms the research tools are suitable and active (van Teijlingen and Hundley, 2001).

After receiving ethical approval from the Liverpool John Moores University Ethics Panel (Ref: 18/EDN/015), consent forms were provided for the gatekeepers to sign. Only upon confirmation of their consent did the student selection process commence. Local approval for the research was not required at the time of data collection. However, I have mentioned this in the policy recommendation in Chapter 6. Similarly, once the ethical requirements were fully addressed, the study proceeded to recruit and select student participants.

This study involved eight students who had recently completed the Secondary Education Examination (SEE) in the Kharahani Municipality and Kapiya VDC of Chitwan district, Nepal. These students were selected from two well-attended and academically active secondary schools, one public and one private, to symbolise the diverse educational contexts within the region. The rationale for including both school types was based on existing differences in resources, pedagogical approaches, and institutional environments between public and private institutions in Nepal, which may shape students' educational experiences differently (Carney and Bista, 2009; Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2018).

The schools were nominated based on their robust attendance records and commitment to support research. Preliminary communication with the Headteacher of the private school and the Vice-Headteacher of the public school was made via mobile phone, during which the principle and possibility of the research were explained. Following this, a Gatekeeper Information Sheet and Consent Forms were posted to both schools (see Appendices B and N). All participant information sheets and consent materials were translated into Nepali where needed to ensure comprehension and inclusivity.

To support privacy and moral standards, I did not access any individual student's information. Schools were also kept anonymous. In their place, the Headteachers

operated authorised symbol numbers, which are unique codes allocated to each student before they attend the SEE exams. These symbol numbers were segregated into male and female classifications. The gatekeepers were then asked to facilitate the stratified randomly selected of four students in public and four students in private schools from their respective schools, two boys and two girls each, using these anonymous identifiers. This method eliminated partiality and maintained the confidentiality of the students involved.

Once selected, the gatekeepers distributed envelopes containing the information sheets and consent forms to the students. These included documents for the students themselves, as well as for their parents and gate keepers where applicable (see Appendices A, B, N, C, P, Q). Students aged 16 or older were allowed to give direct consent, while those aged 14 to 15 required parental consent followed by their own assent. The signed forms were then returned to me via post.

The semi-structured interviews were organised once all consent forms from the gatekeeper and the participant were collected. All eight interviews were accompanied within school buildings, in familiar and quite surroundings to confirm participant comfort. The audio function of Skype was used (no visual), allowing its availability, low budget, and facility to overwhelmed logistical encounters posed by geographic dispersion in Nepal (Janghorban, Latifnejad Roudsari, and Taghipour, 2014; Sullivan, 2012). Students were notified of their right to withdraw at any period or to cut any questions they did not wish to response. Nevertheless, none of the participants indicated to withdraw.

While conducting the interviews, students were offered the choice to communicate in either Nepali or English, subject to their comfort level. All students in the study chose to speak in Nepali, allowing them to communicate their encounters more naturally. Each interview for the pilot study lasted between eight and fourteen minutes, and all interviews were audio-recorded with prior verbal and written consent. I was able to capture advantages and challenges during this duration, which are my research objectives. These recordings were then fully transcribed, translated into English, and anonymised. The interview questions (see Appendix J) were proposed to be open-ended and examining, leasing students to disclose their encounters and perspectives with the SEE grading system in their own words.

The data collected through these interviews occurred examined using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, a flexible method widely used in qualitative research for identifying, examining, and reporting patterns within data. This approach enabled me to explore how students from separate school backgrounds understood and experienced the SEE system, and whether the research design was appropriate for the larger study.

To sum up, this pilot study not only authorised the methodological proposal but also confirmed ethical inclusivity, compliance and practicality. It gave valuable understandings into probable improvements for the main study of the research while keeping the principles of participant autonomy and transparency.

3.7.1 Reflection on the Pilot Study

In a pilot study, I established a significant component of my wider qualitative research, envisioning it as a practical and conceptual bridge to the main phase of data collection. It empowered me to engage with my study framework in a real-world setting, test my data collection tools, and upgrade both my organisational approach and personal method as a researcher. This examines which phases of the pilot were essentially performed, where limitations emerged, and how these informed amendments for the second phase of the study (main study).

From the beginning, conducting semi-structured interviews via Skype (audio-only) allowed me to test the logistics of isolated interviewing. The choice of Skype was practical given the geographical distance and the need to minimise disruption to the participants, who were still affiliated with their respective schools. Most of the participants responded well to this format and demonstrated a good understanding of the questions. However, two students offered minimal responses, which made it clear that remote interviewing, particularly without visual cues, limited opportunities for real-time engagement and rapport-building. It was thus decided that for the main study interviews and FGDs should be conducted in person. The reasons for this were to better experience richer interaction, increased observation of body-language clues and greater comfort for the subjects, especially in the necessary reflection and sensitivity with which certain questions had to be

dealt. Another set of impressions that was gathered during the pilot, but which will need careful attention in the actual study, is that connected with the nature and formulation of the questions.

A key insight from the pilot was the worth of question design. One student, for example, unexpectedly suggested that Nepal might benefit from international contributions to its assessment system. This prompted a realisation that several questions lacked depth and failed to explore underlying reasoning. To address this, I revised and expanded my interview and FGD guide for the main study to include more probing, open-ended questions especially those beginning with *why*, *how*, and *what if* which are central to eliciting detailed and meaningful responses (see Appendix K)

Some questions also proved to be redundant. For instance, responses to Question 7 (What have you seen in SEE so far? see Appendix J) repeated much of the content gathered through earlier questions. While this redundancy was unhelpful with private school students, it unexpectedly encouraged public school students to elaborate further. I interpreted this to mean that repetition can serve as a prompt for students who may require additional encouragement, especially in settings where expression of opinion is less culturally emphasised. This insight led me to retain selective repetition as a purposeful strategy in the main study while ensuring prompts are targeted and context sensitive.

Alternative modification reducing from the pilot was the understanding that question difficulty required refining. Several participants only answered the final part of a multi-layered question, observing key aspects. In response, I streamlined the questions for the main study to be clearer, shorter and more focused, often splitting one complex question into two or three simpler ones.

Similarly, the combination of constructivism and phenomenological approach desired for this research established to be a strong fit for the study's purposes. It acknowledged for an in-depth evaluation of the lived encounters of students absorbing with the new SEE grading system. Operating qualitative interviews adopted this aim by presenting a platform for participants to display on their experiences in a personal and narrative-driven manner. This technique prevented acquire the emotional, cognitive, and cultural dimensions of their experiences, which might not have surfaced in more structured research designs.

The pilot study also highlighted the value of focus group discussions (FGDs). While individual interviews provided deeper insights into each participant's experience, I realised that focus group discussions would enable me to engage more participants simultaneously and explore collective perspectives. Following the individual interviews, I conducted a trial FGD with the Nepal Study Group at LJMU, which acted as a rehearsal for focus group discussions planned in Nepal. This exercise provided useful feedback and helped me refine the FGD questions for both students and teachers (see Appendix K: Questions for FGDs with Students; Appendix L: Questions for Teachers). Established on insights gathered from both students and teachers during the pilot, I also developed a set of interview questions for the District Education Officer to be used in the main study (see Appendix M).

A key methodological knowledge was the role of queries in improving interview depth. As termed by BERA (2018), probes are on purpose follow-up questions used to clarify, strengthen, or develop upon initial reactions. In the pilot study, I retrieved that some participants were hesitant or reserved, and initial reactions were sometimes superficial. By integrating probes such as why you think that? How did that make you feel? or can you tell me more? I urged participants to reflect more profoundly. As a result, I made the intended decision to mix probing strategies systematically into all interviews and FGDs in Phase 2.

The recurring cycle of achieving the pilot study, exhibiting the outcomes and adjusting the tools and strategies of the study indicates the repeated and changing nature of qualitative research. The pilot enabled me to be aware of the pragmatic implications, promote ethical sensitivity and build my confidence in working with participants across different types of school settings. Most importantly, it reinforced my commitment to placing the voice of the participants on which phenomenology is premised and in alignment with the ethical considerations raised by BERA (2018).

3.8 Research Design for the Main Study

Informed by the findings from the pilot study, the main part of this study used two main qualitative methods: focus groups and semi-structured interviews. These methods were used to achieve depth and flexibility for the participants, alongside their comfort, all according to the phenomenological and constructivist paradigms of this study. One learning point of the research was that group backgrounds,

especially for students and teachers, led to more meaningful and common experience being discussed. Interviews, on the other hand, provided a space best suited to those senior-level stakeholders/officials who needed more structure and confidentiality.

The balance of FGDs and interviews empowered the triangulation of views from different points of the education system, with students and teachers who experienced the policy first-hand, and officials who created and implemented it. Correspondingly, the balance between FGDs and interviews enabled the research to remain true to its phenomenological al framework of eliciting both the commonality and individual meanings of educational reform. Reflection on the main part of this study has allowed for taking standard of what was right, what was wrong, and what I have been taught, both about the difficulty of the research process and about the me as a qualitative researcher. This part of reflection is not simply an intellectual exercise but part of the phenomenological and constructivist paradigms, which require a continuing focus on how knowledge is made through lived experience, including that of the researcher (Van Manen, 2016). Reflection again was important, not only for understanding the lived experiences of the students, teachers, and administrators involved, but also for ensuring that my methods truly honoured their voices.Not only did I wish to collect data, but also to interpret the data in a way that remained rooted in the participants' realities, a process that required continual modification and ethicality. It was anticipated that semi-structured interviews would allow the subjects freedom of speech to relate their experiences of the SEE system, but after practical exposure this proved problematic. The individual interviews allowed you to build rapport and observe non-verbal communication, but some participants still seemed inhibited and gave relatively limited responses**.** Discussion in groups stimulated group discussion produced richer accounts and revealed similarities and differences in participants' experiences, which otherwise would have remained hidden in isolation and would have been impossible to formulate through individual interview approaches. From a methodological perspective, this adaptation exemplified the iterative and flexible nature of qualitative research, particularly within a phenomenological framework (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). This procedure encourages me to fulfil my requirement of inclusivity of my mandatory point of view. I noticed this clearly in the use of probing questions, which created opportunities for quieter participants to interact

without extra pressure. Such probes also lent validation to responses and offered participants the opportunity to articulate thoughts that might not otherwise have been expressed (Patton, 2002). The advantages of data triangulation became even clearer as the study unfolded. A comparison of the narratives of students, teachers and officials gave a broader picture of how SEE was experienced at different levels of the education system. Sometimes these views coincided, sometimes they diverged in meaningful ways. This comparison lent strength to the reliability of the findings (Denzin, 2012) and illustrated the layered complexities of educational reform: how policies that may appear straightforward in writing can be interpreted and experienced in quite different ways, depending on the positions of various stakeholders. Reflectively, then, the decision to retain both interviews and FGDs was not simply a methodological decision, but a philosophical one, in keeping with the phenomenological belief of allowing participants the opportunity to speak in terms that were natural to them. The fact that it was considered appropriate to let the data generate the method, rather than the other way around, is one of the study's major strengths. I learnt the value of listening, not only to want to hear from participants, but also to hear where the research itself was leading. Reflexivity involved recognising when participants were comfortable and being willing to adapt the research approach accordingly. It meant being open to new views and willing to pursue them. Most importantly, it reminded me that at the core of qualitative research is a human relationship, and that it is largely the respect of that relationship that is crucial in carrying out meaningful ethical research. In conclusion, the main study presented to me showed that a strong methodology should remain flexible and open to realities that arise during the study process. By careful reflection and knowledge generated from these reflections, I can retain adherence to the phenomenological roots of the study, whilst at the same time providing greater depth, rigour and inclusiveness for that study. These reflections showed me that research is not simply about collecting answers, but also about learning how to ask appropriate questions and remaining open to where participants' responses may lead the research.

Ethical Considerations

The research was firmly rooted in ethical principles, particularly given the involvement of children and young people in an educational capacity. The work of the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) directed the focus of

the investigation, stressing respect for autonomy, voluntary participation and avoidance of harm. In respect of these issues, full information was given to the participants regarding the nature and purpose of the investigation and from what need would occur and whether their co-operation could be expected, this without pressure or coercion of any kind. The participants were also made aware of their rights to withdraw at any time without consequences.

Ethical considerations were not just a practical necessity in this research they were the driving force behind every choice made from how participants were attempted to how their voices were offered in this research. Working with students, teachers and government on an issue as crucial educational reform wanted having to adopt a thoughtful and caring method particularly as numerous of the participants were young and still handling the difficulties of academic life. So, the ethical considerations were significant as this research involved human participants who were giving personal reflections on their education system some of which were critical in nature it was important to safeguard their well-being, privacy and autonomy as that was necessary to uphold both the ethical and academic integrity of the work. My attitude towards ethics was informed by the British Educational Research Association (2018) ethical guidelines which stress respect, voluntary participation, informed consent and right to withdraw. Prior to data collection being initiated ethical approval was obtained from the Liverpool John Moores University Ethics Panel. This implied submitting designated papers defining the aims and objectives of the study and the methods and procedures which would be approved to protect the welfare of participants. Once ethical approval had been given supplementary steps were taken to confirm that participants especially students fully understood the effects of participation. All information sheets and consent forms, parental and student, were written in simple, easy to understand Nepali and English. For students under 16, written consent was obtained from parents as well as student assent. School children of high school age in schools gave their own written consent to participate. To maintain anonymity and confidentiality all participants in these interviews were assigned a pseudonym or a code (for instance, the use of numbers of symbols for the student respondents) so that they could not be identified. Special care was taken so that nothing which would recognise the participants in the research was involved in interview schedules and that any identifying matter was omitted from the transcripts, which data was collected on

securely stored on computers with password entry, etc. Especially was attention paid to the confidentiality of the Central Government Official who insisted that his exact title should not be disclosed. This request was observed and respected throughout the work and in the final documentation. I was continually alert of the power relationship during the process of obtaining data in the schools, where there is often the risk of children feeling compelled to respond or to give the correct answer. With a view to solving this, there was continuous reassurance to the participants in these interviews that there were no correct or incorrect answers to the interview questions, and they could also skip questions or withdraw altogether from the research at any time and there would be no adverse consequences. There were also ethical discipline problems to resolve on cross-cultural grounds. It was required to explain to gatekeepers such as school authorities the meanings of concepts of confidentiality and of voluntary participation, so that the latter were given to both students and teachers. It is apparent, especially in Nepal, since educational systems of pyramid are very strong and the culture of research is still in its infancy, that much time, clarification, and patience are sometimes required to guarantee that all the participants are confident and enabled to respond clearly. As suggested by Taylor, and his colleagues Baines and Vanclay (2013), it is often the case in this cross-cultural type of examination that I am required to function as cultural commentators as well as investigators. Finally, I was sensible that the very fact of the examination being conducted was likely to affect the respondents in the research as students concerned, for example, might feel worried about how their opinions would be used. For this reason, there was encouragement to complete openness, but no questions were asked as to grades, or ranking, or academic performance.

Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all participants in accordance with BERA (2018) guidelines. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. The process began by contacting the selected schools. Each school was approached via post and provided with a Gatekeeper Information Sheet (Appendix B) and a Gatekeeper Consent Form (Appendix N), which explained the aims and scope of the research and enabled Headteachers to decide whether their school wished to participate.

Once consent forms were received, arrangements were made with both Headteachers to recruit eight students for the pilot study. Each student was given a Participant Information Sheet (Appendix A) outlining the study and their rights. For students aged 16 and over, written consent was obtained directly (Appendix O). For students aged 14–15, parental consent was first obtained (Appendix Q), followed by student assent (Appendix P).

A similar consent process was used for the main study. Headteachers were contacted directly and provided with Participant Information Sheets and Consent Forms (see Appendix N, O, P, Q, R and S). After receiving completed consent documents, arrangements were made for recruiting students and teachers.

To maintain confidentiality, Headteachers assisted in the selection of participants. Gender-balanced lists of students were created, and participants were randomly selected. I did not have access to identifiable student records, ensuring compliance with UK GDPR standards.

For teacher participants, Headteachers helped organise focus group discussions (FGDs). Teachers were given Information Sheets and Consent Forms (Appendices E and N), and sessions were held after school hours for convenience. This process ensured that participation was voluntary, informed, and compliant with BERA's (2018) ethical standards.

3.8.1 Anonymity and Confidentiality

Confidentiality and anonymity and stayed as important pillars in safeguarding participants' rights throughout this study. These values were not just organizational requirements; they were crucial to structure trust, inspiring honesty, and caring or protecting participants predominantly in a context connecting students, teachers, and government officials discussing a high-stakes subject such as grading reform. This approach allied with the moral standards outlined by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) and the UK's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Why were these ethics so important was because they shaped a safe space where participants could express themselves freely without fear about potential repercussions. This was particularly critical when subtle views or reviews of the SEE reform were shared. Each school in the research was anonymized using letters (e.g., School A, School B), and each participant was given a numerical code. For instance, students were identified

using their pre-assigned exam symbol numbers to avoid using names or personally identifiable information. During transcription and analysis, all references that could reveal a participant's identity were carefully removed.

When reporting the study's findings, extreme caution was exercised to protect the identities of those holding special positions. The District Education Officer (DEO) and Central Government Official (CGO), for example, were identified only by general descriptive language, not by name or title, per their specific request and agreement to mutually protect each other from subtle identification, given how few people hold these roles.

One particularly difficult and sensitive ethical issue arose when a small group of students began discussing their grade levels with one another during casual conversations. Since this information was volunteered by the students and was outside the scope of the research goals, I chose to redirect the conversation rather than document it. A proactive approach was also used in designing the interview and focus group guides to avoid asking questions about student grades.

It was sometimes challenging to maintain participant anonymity when students were proud to have participated and wanted to share their involvement with others. In response, it was explained to all participants why it was necessary to keep their participation anonymous - not to conceal any personal data, but to avoid creating an atmosphere of exclusivity among classmates who did not participate.

To reduce potential bias surrounding the selection of student participants, I asked those who were selected through the stratified random sampling process to keep their participation confidential and not to discuss their involvement with other students who had not been selected. This was also intended to protect participants' privacy and confidentiality in accordance with the ethical and data-protection procedures of the study. Although students received a certificate acknowledging their participation in the research, this was provided directly to them and did not identify their responses or disclose their participation to others. The use of this approach helped ensure that I was maintaining the confidential nature of my research process. It also ensured that student volunteers participated in this study voluntarily; it also allowed all students to have an equal opportunity to participate regardless of their selection as a participant or non-participant.

3.8.2 Cross-Cultural Sensitivity

In a cross-cultural context like Nepal, the ethical considerations went far beyond a simple checklist. During both the pilot and main studies, I observed that some core components, such as anonymity and confidentiality, were not part of the culture among school leaders and some participants. As a native Nepali speaker, I was able to articulate the concepts, and, more importantly, I would often paraphrase or repeat my explanation until I felt the participants understood them completely. The linguistic and cultural compatibility was a significant strength. As Taylor, Baines and Vanclay (2013) point out, successful cross-cultural research is often reliant on me as a cultural mediator. Nevertheless, privacy was not always promised, especially once the research was done. I had faith that the gatekeepers and participants would keep things private; however, I cannot ensure that full confidentiality was upheld. This limitation is one of the realities of working in communities with prevalent breaches of confidentiality, where confidentiality will not have the same institutional weight as it does in Western academia. I acknowledged this foible and did what was within my control to mitigate possible breaches through transparent communication and central approval.

I found that once participants understood the need for ethical practices, they appreciated the protocols. I felt that teachers, school leaders, and even students demonstrated a level of respectability that was reassuring and humbling. Explaining GDPR and ethical obligations in local, familiar terms helped me foster a shared understanding and uphold ethical fidelity, despite cultural divides.

3.8.3 Critical Reflection on Positionality and Cross-Cultural Research Practice

3.8.3.1 My Positionality

My social identity, cultural background, and evolving positionality played a significant role in shaping the research process, especially in data collection, analysis, and interpretation of results. Born and raised in Nepal and educated there before coming to the UK to study, I have close familiarity with Nepal's education system. However, fearing failure for SLC, I opted to study GCE A Levels instead; siblings and other family members completed SLC. Personal experiences motivated me to investigate the transformation of Nepal's education system and to better understand the experiences of the new SEE grading among students and teachers.

During data collection, I was a doctoral student and approached this study primarily as a research student rather than as a practising teacher. This outsider position was maintained despite cultural and linguistic familiarity with the context. During thesis writing and analysis, I also took on part-time lecturing in UK higher education and completed a Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education as it was a short course (PGCert). This professional development broadened my understanding of teaching, assessment, feedback and marking. This allowed me to approach data critically with a sharper critical eye and remain reflexive about different educational contexts. Experiences as both a student and lecturer, and positions as insider and outsider, therefore, gave me a stronger understanding of the research context and affected how I interacted with participants and interpreted results throughout the study.

Familiarity has provided clarity and connectivity, while providing caution. Ethical practice should be reflexive. BERA (2018) points out that ethical practice is an ongoing process, and this applies particularly in my setting, where I was situated in a familiar research context and taken on a formal research role.

The Insider and Outside Dynamics: There was no question about gaining trust, and this has helped me connect with participants in a meaningful way. Similarly, I find that conducting research in my home country as a native researcher is rewarding. On the other hand, it can be ethically complex too. The familiar language of being a researcher with ties to the context brought challenges, especially in remaining reflexive about my own assumptions and navigating language-related ethical dilemmas. As a researcher, my personal and professional links, prior knowledge, and assumptions about Nepal's education system could influence my questions, how I perceive and interpret, and the conclusions I draw. I was mindful of the likelihood that my respondent might offer a socially desirable response rather than a genuine reflection. This sense of awareness also helped me choose a focus group discussion, in which open-ended questions were asked. Throughout the study, I was aware of the dual role I carried as an insider who shared language, culture, and educational experience, and as an outsider confined by Limu's (Liverpool john moores University) academic framework. My reflexive notes, taken alongside data collection, provided insight into those same

insider-outsider dynamics and helped me be aware of how my presence could impact participants' answers.

3.9 Cross-Cultural Research Practices

Cross-cultural research, conducting research across cultural boundaries, is challenging because it may require support from investigators and cultural mediators. In my research case as well, research informed by Limu's academic frameworks and ethical standards within the Nepali educational context required a different cultural understanding of research ethics. In practice, concepts common in UK research ethics, such as informed consent and confidentiality, required careful consideration of critical issues and a proper explanation to gatekeepers and participants in Nepal, where such concepts are not practised seriously. Despite the best efforts to communicate and uphold ethical standards, it is difficult to ensure that all participants fully adopted the principles of confidentiality. This can be considered as one of the limitations of cross-cultural qualitative research, particularly in the context where institutional structures for research governance are still developing. However, to maintain confidentiality, I provided a certificate for participating in my research and kept it as a reward to keep everything confidential. So, this technique helps me to reduce the risk.

3.9.1 Note on Language and Transcription

Language was an important part of the design, execution, and analytical parts of this study. As a native speaker of Nepali, I conducted all interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) with students, teachers, and policymakers in Nepali. This choice of language was intentional and necessary, given the study's goal of understanding participants lived experiences of educational reform. For many participants, especially secondary school students, expressing their thoughts in English could have been limiting or, at best, uncomfortable. So, by allowing the FGDs and interviews to be in Nepali, I was able to provide participants with space to express their views with naturalness, comfort, and greater authenticity.

Conducting qualitative research in a common language was also a fit for the study's constructivist, phenomenological research approach that seeks meaning-making in context. Language is more than just a means of communication; it is part of, and reflective of, culture and identity. I think that when participants can clearly convey their thoughts in their own language, they are more likely to share deeper, more reflective thoughts on both a personal and professional level.

3.9.2 The Process of Transcribing and Translation

I transcribed each group discussion or interview after either focus group data collection (in Nepali) verbatim from the audio recording in Nepali. I paid careful attention to detail in that I listened, then I listened again to make sure that every verbatim was as close as possible to the original meaning I transcribed in a comfortable, quiet and dedicated space in my house where I could easily listen to the audio and reduce distractions. After I transcribed the interviews, I then translated them into English to help with the analysis and writing up of the academic materials.

This two-layered process of transcription and translation was consistently practiced with both the pilot study and main study. The two layered process allowed me to thoroughly immerse myself in the data and to develop a detailed understanding of each participant's voice and their context in which they spoke. Transcribing in the original language allowed me to appreciate the richness and rhythm of the dialogue and translating them into English allowed me to make the data accessible for the purposes of coding, thematic analysis, and scholarly experiential reporting.

3.9.3 Cross-Language Intersecting Methodological and Ethical Concerns

Despite this careful translation methodology, it posed several methodological and ethical challenges. There were aspects of the Nepali language that directly informed culturally situated expressions, idioms, and metaphors that have no definitive English equivalents, like the concepts they describe. This made certain phrases difficult to translate, as I felt I would lose the deeper meaning or emotional tone of certain expressions in my translations.

For instance, students often used a polite form of “Hajur” when answering questions. Based on tone and context, depending on how participants used the word, “Hajur” could refer to a gentle request to repeat the question or to a more affirmative acknowledgement of a genuine “saying yes” answer. In teacher FGDs, I noted that participants employed the metaphor “Matteko Hatti”, which means “high elephant” in the jungle, to contextualise their perception of the chaos and lack of control in local governance following federalisation, particularly regarding financial, administrative, and political matters. In my translation, I opted for elephants behaving wildly in the jungle to convey the original image of unchecked authority and institutional mess.

In this way, these two examples highlight the interplay between language, culture, and interpretation when utilising translation. As Pherali (2012) recalls, translation does not entail linguistic exchange alone in a research context but is rather a process of negotiating concepts in a cross-cultural space. In line with his thoughts, I retained selected Nepali terms throughout the English transcripts and provided contextual placement of these terms in square brackets in the transcript. This bilingual documentation allowed for linguistic identity, with the additional benefit of giving interpretive transparency to the process, while maintaining/validating the credibility of participant voices.

Furthermore, I conducted the translation with reflexivity, I was concerned that my position as a researcher would influence how participant meanings were constructed through my own phrasings and interpretations. Therefore, it was important to work in a conscientious and iterative way, often reviewing both the audio recordings and the translated transcripts to best ensure these meanings were communicated as intended. I did not make decisions at this point in the study. However, I felt an ethical responsibility to represent participants' experiences accurately.

3.9.3 Observation of Students Participants

During the research, observations were made of interaction and communication patterns among students,as well as their engagement with me as an adult researcher. This also included observations about the cultural context, which might have influenced their engagement in the research process. I did not use observation as an independent method of data collection; rather, observations occurred alongside both stages of the study through my reflexive participation. In addition to the interviews and focus group discussions, I continued to keep a few lines of reflexive (thinking back) observation/impression notes throughout the research process. Those notes documented things such as students' confidence, students' hesitations, interactions among the other students, and reactions to me as an adult researcher. The purpose of these notes was to help me consider whether my presence or position relative to the students might have affected their engagement.

While conducting interviews and facilitating focus groups, I recorded students' willingness to participate, communication methods, confidence levels, patterns of interaction among peers, and responses to me. I paid particular attention to all

examples of hesitation, silence, deference to other students before answering, non-verbal signs of avoidance (such as refusing eye contact), nervous smiles, etc.

This allowed me to become aware of the factors that may influence student engagement in the research process. These observations focused specifically on behaviours that could influence how students expressed their experiences of the SEE grading system, rather than on evaluating students themselves. The observations made during the pilot study directly informed several methodological changes that were implemented in the main study. Similarly, one of the key observational insights from both the pilot and the main study was the evident hesitation of many students to openly share their views, particularly during the initial stage of the semi-structured interviews in the pilot study and the focus group discussions in the main study. These methodological adjustments resulted in richer discussions during the main study, enabling students to provide fuller accounts of their experiences with the SEE grading system and improving the depth and quality of the qualitative data collected. Moreover, this process helped students to build trust and share their experiences with confidence. Similarly, prior to conducting main study I took extra time for the focus groups to have an informal chat with the students, explained purpose of this study, reassured them that there were nothing right or wrong to express their opinion, encouraged them to express their opinions and emphasised how confidential their responses will be kept. I also applied a less formalised method of enquiring, beginning with open-ended, non-intrusive questions that encouraged students to reflect on their experiences with the SEE grading system. The pilot study also emphasised the point of giving students enough time to answer any question (without interruption) and providing support and encouragement to those who were more reserved or quiet in nature, rather than aiming for specific individuals. To summarize, the student responses from the pilot study contributed to me in developing an enhanced data collection strategy and improving both the quantity and quality of qualitative data collected in the main study by changing from semi structured interview to Focus group discussion for the students.

Nonetheless, this observation can be understood within the wider cultural context in Nepal, where children's behaviour and expression may be shaped by adult expectations and socialisation practices, while opportunities for children to

contribute their views to some forms of decision-making may also be limited (Burkey et al., 2016; Bhomi, 2016).

Within Nepal's ecocultural environment, culturally distinctive practices may influence who is allowed to speak, when, and how their opinions and ideas are expressed. In many contexts, children are expected to listen, not speak, particularly when teachers (or parents) or any senior involved in adult-led activities is giving their opinions and ideas about the project. Children, as noted in Burkey et al. (2016), seemed to rely on cultural norms shaped by ecocultural contexts in rural Nepal, which reduced their behavioural signals or ways of interacting with their peers or the researchers, leading to them being much less assertive participants in adult-led discussions. Qualitative discussions with young participants can be influenced by different cultural norms, especially when they rely on young people's verbal responses or on their more active contributions to knowledge development.

The students understood the questions, but due to lack of practice on open discussion they were hesitant to express themselves openly in the presence of an adult researcher. Often, this encouraged me to ask the same follow-up question again to get a young person to respond in some form. Rephrasing or repeating questions helped encourage students to share views that they might not have expressed initially.

More noticeable was the observable difference in ease of communication between private and public-school students. Students from private schools expressing their ideas and generally communicated their answers more undoubtedly and fluently. This may be because they experienced more active learning, have had more exposure to spoken English or Nepali than public school students, or are perhaps more likely have opportunities that require classroom discussion. Public school students tended to be more reticent, respond less, or contribute later.

Even though there were visible difference in the participation, their expression between private and public-school students there were no differences in the content of them of their experience as I also spotted the in-group dynamic some more expressive student were repeatedly contributing to my study while other were nod head and spoked only after encouragements.

These observations are also supported by the literature on children's agency and voice in non-EU contexts. As Johnson (2017) reports, many children in Nepal said they perceive their exclusion from decision-making processes at home and at school. This exclusion cuts off their opportunities to practice and develop expressive capacities, and the children's reports have led them to internalise the belief that their opinions are unimportant or undervalued. Consequently, even when asked directly in these research situations, many children first offered no response or preferred to defer to their more vocal peers.

Punch (2002) outlines the ethical and methodological issues in qualitative research with schoolchildren from Nepal. They argued that cultural and linguistic sensitivities often require flexibility and adaptability to ensure trust between the participants and me, with the time given to children for their responses. I also encouraged their participation through non-verbal cues indicating that I wanted students to share (or keep talking), and I remained aware of the power relationship between myself as an adult researcher and the children participating in the study. In this study, I used many of these approaches, which were effective in establishing trust and comfort among the participants.

An additional consideration was how students' use of voice might be liable on the issue of gender. This was not the focus of the study as there were no findings to related to it contextually.

In summary, at the time of data collection, I observed that cultural context was important for how groups of students might know whether to participate or not participate. The absence of a strong cultural expectation for the pre-planned adult-led discussion contexts to use children's input in Nepal, was framed both as a challenge and a learning experience. While the students were initially slower to offer input, with time, repetition, and reassurance, many students had something important to share.

The differences in articulation between public and private school students also suggested that their educational settings may have influenced how confidently they communicated their views. These observations highlight the importance of culturally aware research methods to develop means of accommodating developmentally appropriate local, social, and cultural norms, power hierarchies, and the specific context of child participation. This is helpful for me to note, in pursuit

of ethical considerations, that appropriate degrees of methodological rigour are required to produce desirable research outcomes when working with children in contexts that do not routinely attend to children's voices or ideas.

3.10 Chapter Summary

This chapter reflects on the methodological and ethical implications explored throughout the study aimed at understanding how students, teachers, and policy makers in Nepal describe and make meaning of the transition from School Leaving Certificate (SLC) to Secondary Education Examination (SEE). The study used a qualitative phenomenological approach operating theoretically with constructivist - exploring - lived experiences and the meaning derived from educational reform. A pilot study enabled the study of instruments to be evaluated and modified in ways that reflected the design of the main study, situated within the social context of the educational reform and mindfulness of the ethics of research. The study combined semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions methods, to get rich and multiple perspectives. The interviews allowed the key education stakeholders to have a private space to express their views, while the FGDs opened a conversation among peers, and provided larger support for peer participants. The reason for keeping gender-specific groups, and using languages comfortable to participants was deliberate, mindful approaches to building respectful and safe spaces for the participants. Throughout the study, the methods were flexibly applied and responsive to the differing experiences of participants and allowed further inductive engagement and the continued use of probing, open ended questions as opportunities allowed.

Ethics was a lens through which each part of the research was considered, guided by informed consent, confidentiality, and intercultural sensitivity. The transcription and translation facilitated both care with respect to maintaining the participants' voice and cultural connotation were preserved. My positionality of being a native Nepali speaker was an advantage in the aspect of communication that enabled a level of nuance while also engaging in reflexivity with respect to positionality, subjectivity and biases. Overall, this chapter communicated with an educated and human-centred rationale for planning the research to be both doable and credible with respect to living realities for the participants These observations increased confidence in interpreting students' experiences of the SEE grading system because

responses were understood within their cultural and classroom context. Therefore, the next chapter will present the findings.

Chapter Four: Findings

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I present the findings from the pilot and main studies on how students, teachers, and government officials experienced and made sense of the Secondary Education Examination (SEE) system in Nepal. I first clarify my thematic data analysis method and how I derived the main themes, after which I explain how I present the findings in the remaining parts of this chapter.

I analysed the data using the six-phase thematic data analysis process described in Chapter 3 (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It was an iterative and interpretative task that required constant comparison and refinement to ensure that the themes emerged inductively from participants' lived experiences rather than leading them toward predetermined themes. The pilot study played an extremely formative role with respect to my analytical approach and the structure of the present chapter. The study was undertaken to test the clarity of my interview and focus-group questions and to gain a preliminary insight into participants' perceptions of the SEE system. Consequently, it led to the emergence of themes such as examination stress, teacher preparedness and differences between public and private schools on a recurring basis. As in my earlier draft, I have presented the pilot study results in separate paragraphs to retain their exploratory nature and to indicate how the findings from the pilot stage influenced the subsequent stages of my research.

On the insights gained from the pilot study, the main study enabled me to expand and deepen the existing. Through further coding, evaluation, and refinement of the data, I identified four main categories of themes under which the remainder of this study will be structured. These are as follows:

The Impact and Opportunities of SEE -- considerations of the effects of the reform on exam pressures, motivation, inclusivity, perceptions of fairness, etc.

The Challenges in SEE Implementation -- examination of the aspects of training of teachers and grading of teachers and disparities between public and private schools.

Policy and Structural Challenges -- thoughts about the implications of decentralisation, governance and institutional capacity.

The Future Prospects and Reforms -- thoughts about sustainability and improvement of the SEE system held by the participants.

The evolution of these structured themes indicates my development in the analytical and organisational aspects of my research skills throughout the PhD process of the PhD. The move from the descriptive account of the pilot findings to the more systematic presentation of organised themes in the main study illustrates how my capacity to interpret qualitative data and structure it to present coherent themes has gradually developed as my study has progressed.

Throughout this chapter, I shall use the participants' own words, so far as possible, to illustrate and substantiate my interpretations of the data. For reasons of transparency and clarity, I categorised my participants as follows.

Students: A1S-D8S. Similarly, for example, A1S (S means student). It is also quoted in sky blue colour in the background.

Teachers: A1T-D8T (T means Teacher), using the same notation. In this code, T means Teachers. is colour coded in Peach shade.

Government officials: DEO (District/Local Government Officer) in light pink colour code and CGO is colour coded (Central Government Officer).

In the following sections, I will first present the results of the pilot study, which were presented above in separate paragraphs as they were recorded during the initial days of this study under six headings, which are explained in the next section, and then I will go on to give the results of the main study, which are allocated structurally to the above four thematic categories. This provided a coherent and understandable framework for the reader to follow in evaluating how my findings evolved from the exploratory insights of the pilot study into the conceptually grounded thematic explorations developed during my PhD.

Pilot study

This section of the chapter reports the results of the pilot study, which aimed to explore

student experiences of the Secondary Education Examination (SEE) in two different schools

in Chitwan District, Nepal - one private (School X) and one public (School Y) during the initial phase to capture broader student experiences and perspectives. The pilot was a key part of the overarching PhD research design. It was undertaken to assess the research instrument's viability, ethical and logistical issues, and the interview format. There is a

large agreement from Creswell & Creswell (2017), Doody & Doody (2015) and Yin (2018) that

Pilot studies are an important strategy to increase methodological rigour, promote instrument reliability and identify practical and ethical issues before embarking on a full research study.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with students in a pilot study, in which eight interviews were conducted via Skype audio. There were eight students, whose responses ranged from 561 to 1550 words, with an average response length of 705 words.

Qualitative research aims to generate a wealth of information about participants' experiences, which can be used to gain insight into their lives. For clarity, I also include details about their dataset, either the total transcript length or the overall number of responses. This provides the reader with an idea of how much and what type of data were collected; however, these measures would not provide an assessment of quality on their own (Ogden & Cornwell, 2010; Tracy, 2010).

The interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed using Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis method. The main themes were as follows: understanding of the SEE assessment, experience with teacher support, understanding of the grading scheme, advantages and disadvantages of SEE, and educational experience.

4.1.1 Thematic Analysis and categorisation of emerged themes:

Thematic analysis shows that there are the following main categories:

- Understanding of evaluation of SEE
- Experience of Teachers' support in SEE
- Understanding of the grading system
- Advantages of SEE
- Challenges of SEE
- Personal Experiences of SEE

There were no differences in the responses of male and female students in relation to the questions of pilot study except the length of responses between private and public school. It was found that private schools' students were more articulate about the way they

described their experience. However, Public schools' students were straightforward, not much articulation. Thus, the response themes generated were divided into these categories so that the diverse perspective and the experiences could be covered by both group of students.

4.1.1 Understanding of evaluation of SEE

All the students described the SEE examination as easy. One explained that they were

> *Quite easy compared to previous exams in year 9 (Respondent 5)*

Another explained further, saying,

> *What I have understood is it helps students to be knowledgeable, to be skillful and it has made quite easy to open our opinions* (Respondent 6)

The students' responses highlight that the SEE exams are more practical and student-friendly than the previous examination system.

4.1.2 Experience of teachers' support in SEE

All students, both private and public, felt well supported by their teachers. Without exception, students mentioned their teachers were proactive. However, the quote shows a slight difference between private and public students' experiences due to differences in types of school facilities. Therefore, private schools had hostel facilities and public schools did not. However, public schools had extra coaching classes run at the same time as SEE. Nonetheless, the degree and intention of support provided by private- and public-school teachers were similar. However, infrastructure such as an ICT lab was not available to the public and was in the pipeline, whereas an ICT lab was available to private schools from the start.

One respondent explained how,

They arranged tuition classes and hostels to stay to study. They were always thinking about how to teach to improve students' achievements and how to guide students to improve their studies. Everybody was enrolled compulsorily in Hostel [In private school it common to have a hostel to stay for students to improve their studies]. Teachers were very proactive they also find the information from internet and shared with us for extra activities to improve studies. They encouraged us to not only focus on books but also to do more practice through practice book and find more information from outside. We woke up earlier than ever. (Respondent 2).

They said this made them focus more on their studies. Another student said,

Yes, teachers have helped a lot. Teachers have notified us of different kinds of questions which might appear in exams, and how to solve them or answer them to get good marks (Respondent 6)

The students' view reflected two major issues: teachers were fully dedicated and placed strong emphasis on discipline, exam preparation, and performance orientation, but students were also put under extra pressure, which could have limited their independent thinking and creativity.

4.2.4 Understanding of the Grading System-GPA

All the students understood that SEE is not a percentage marking system, but it has a marks range although not all of them understood how it was calculated.

However, only one student gave a full answer in which they explained their understanding of the Grade Point Average (GPA)

Grade point average means whichever subjects are taught in the schools it is related to all the subjects. For example, we have 8 subjects so the total marks that one gets from all subjects which are divided by number of subjects (for e.g. 8 subjects) is called Grade point average (Respondent 5)

It was suggested that this system offered students more flexibility because

Students getting good marks can study science and some students who secure less marks can also choose different subjects depending on what grade they get (Respondent 6)

However, there was discussion about the fairness of marking and dissatisfaction with the differences in marking between internal and external markers.

One student said,

One student was getting good marks in the school exams. Exam papers are checked outside the schools in SEE and most of the students got less than expected marks according to internal schools' exams result. May be marking scheme are designed like that, I do not know. Yes, a lot of dissatisfaction, like one student got A+ inside schools' exams, but they got much lower than what was expected in the final exams that I felt was unfair (Respondent 1)

The GPA system was seen by all students as a disadvantage of SEE. Some of the students mentioned that;

We could not see our exact marks like in percentages (Respondent 1)

A student expressed:

A student who secures 90 and 99 will get the same Grade, which is not fair (Respondents 2)

One had a different view on:

…. disadvantages in it but there are things to improve. For example, each 7 marks or 7 % of the mark one obtains are marked different Grades. A student who gets 90% and 99% will have secure same grade which is not fair for students who work hard to get good marks, and it could have been divided in each five marks then it would be better… (Respondent 5)

The student's response highlights that students struggle to understand the technical aspects of this system and are not convinced of its fairness and transparency. Students' concern is with the recognition of their individual effort and the feeling of inequality.

Advantages of SEE

Regarding the advantages of SEE, students have shared mixed views. Five of the eight students indicated a positive attitude towards the grading system, while two expressed dissatisfactions. Simple counts can also be reported by qualitative researchers to provide an initial description of how frequently various events or themes appear in the data. In this regard, they can assist in supporting qualitative interpretations of the data, not replace them (Sandelowski, 2001; Maxwell, 2013).

Those who liked it said they found SEE easier than Year 9 examinations. Those who disliked it were the ones who mentioned that the exams were hard.

Many commented on it being an improvement on the previous system because

*Nobody would fail (*Respondent 4)

Also, it was

Easier to Secure good marks due to practical exams added on to each subject worth 25 marks except two math. And you can study further even if you fail 3-4 subjects (Respondent 3)

One commented

We heard about a lot of suicide cases due to failure in SLC now we do not hear that. (Respondent 8)

Four students thought that had made things more difficult. This was illustrated by one who commented...

*Has made students laborious or hard workers (*respondent 4)

Because

For example, through this SEE teacher can find out the student's academic ability, also they can find how far students can achieve (Respondent 5)

In addition, they can find out how skilful students can be because, through SEE.

For students it has been made easier for grouping (means to divide students according to their grade and mix match in a group with learning process. (Respondent 6)

One student commented on the other benefits that SEE had brought.

We will have a good literacy rate, and this means we will get more donations from foreigners (Respondent 4)

The findings reveal that most students recognised several advantages, but a few still disagreed, indicating that SEE reform is socially progressive, even as challenges persist.

4.1.3 Challenges of SEE

Two of the students from public school Y indicated that they found the SEE challenging and mentioned that.

Studying for whole year and only one - 3 hrs exams would determine their grade.
(Respondent 1)

Two other students from private school X said that if they did not get a meaningful pass mark, such as C+, they would not be able to enroll in the subject they preferred in year 8 and pursue their chosen career, which they found challenging. (Respondent 2 and 4)

However, one student expressed a different view on this, saying.

One should not focus only on one subject; you should focus on every subject equally (Respondent 4)

Despite several advantages, students have expressed dissatisfaction with the fairness and flexibility of the SEE exam system.

4.1.4 Students' personal experience of SEE

Students shared a range of personal and emotional experiences. Four of the eight students said it was easy, three said it was difficult, and one said it was 50–50. Therefore, these are the common themes that emerged across the private school X responses:

.... first experience, nervousness, had to study a lot and did a lot of hard work, full of Challenges, as the teacher mentioned, as iron gate it was correct, hard but not

that easy, unique, exam patterns were different from previous exams, a lot of curiosity, very new, this exam made easy for Year 8…. (Collective Quotes from respondents 1,2,3,4)

A quote of mixed experience

I felt SEE was 50-50 … (Respondent 1)

And these two lines were critiques from Private schools:

This grading system has focused more on average students. (Respondent 2)

Just because one obtained one mark less, it can affect their whole GPA. (Respondent 4)

These are collective common themes that emerged from public school Y:

A unique point for critique added was.

… It was Scientific way/ better than before means Year 9 followed by, …. It measured … *A student who get 90% and 99% will have secure same grade which is not fair for students who work hard… it could have been divided in each five marks then it would be better*…and criticised …. I *didn't feel that teachers very well trained*… (Respondent 5)

The personal experiences of the SEE (Secondary Education Examination) differed in the two schools. The students at the private school said that the examination was a new and unique experience, requiring hard work, preparation, and adjustment to a different examination system. Some found this easy, while others found it difficult, with mixed feelings, however, arising. The public-school students found the SEE generally an improvement on the old SLC system and described it as more scientific, more child-oriented and less stressful. They appreciated that the system reduced examination pressure and anxiety about failure. Across both schools, however, some students expressed dissatisfaction with the fairness and clarity of the grading system. Moreover, the teachers' preparation for the new examination system was viewed as inadequate in some cases, while 90% of students agreed that the teachers have been supportive throughout. Furthermore, experiences in both private and public schools highlight ongoing improvements in assessment practices and the need for greater focus on teacher capacity building.

4.1.5 Moving forward from the pilot study

There was no significant difference in the responses of male and female students from both schools. However, there were differences in response length between private and public schools, with responses from private schools being longer. The pilot study findings revealed various lived-through experiences among the eight participants (students). Five students described the SEE exam as relatively easy, two found it difficult, and one felt it was somewhere in between. These reactions provided an immediate sign that experiences of the SEE exam can vary widely, even within a small sample.

When comparing different school types, students from public schools tended to view the SEE as a learning opportunity, rationalising that it helped them become more open-minded and expressive in their thinking. However, a student from the private school raised concerns about the discrepancy between internal and external assessment marks and expressed dissatisfaction with both.

These findings from the pilot study aligned with a study conducted in India, which also reported similar advantages and disadvantages in a comparable grading system. Although gender differences were examined, the data did not show a major difference in male and female students' responses.

Overall, the pilot showed that students' views of the SEE are influenced by varied factors, including school type, personal ability and expectations. This was an important consideration that highlighted the complexity of the grading system's impact and indicated that I needed to find broader stakeholder representation.

4.1.6 Summary and implication of the pilot study

The pilot study was useful in informing my understanding of the students' experiences of the Secondary Education Examination (SEE) in the Chitwan district. Various themes emerged, which helped to inform my understanding of student perceptions and directly benefited me in producing the methodology section of the main study. During the pilot study, three of four students from the public school reported no real difficulties with the SEE system. Reporting this frequency will help show how many responses were distributed, rather than quantifying the qualitative findings (Sandelowski, 2001).

On the other hand, the private school students provided fuller and clearer answers, pointing out both advantages and disadvantages. One general advantage shared by both schools was that no one fails in the SEE system, which was a rather comforting thought to them. A

disadvantage, however, was that the grading system was less accurate than the previous numerical method. During the interviews with public school students, I found that they had to make repeated efforts to provide detailed answers, whereas students from the private school were much freer and more explicit in their speech. A public-school student provided an adequate explanation of the meaning of Grade Point Average (GPA), suggesting that most participants had very limited knowledge of the grading system.

This information proved valuable in improving the structure and tools for the main study. The experiences of the pilot study revealed the need for a change in the data collection methodology that I would use. Since the pilot relied on audio data from Skype interviews, it became evident that the interaction needed to be much richer to generate a deeper understanding. Therefore, in the main research, I decided to change the research tools to face-to-face group interviews with groups of six to eight students and teachers, and to conduct a face-to-face semi-structured interview with the Central Government Officer (CGO). This form of interaction allowed for greater rapport building, observation of body language, and richer discussion, resulting in more authentic and comprehensive data. The focus groups presented participants with an informal environment in which they could voice their views openly and collaboratively. The improved quality and depth of insight gained in this way significantly enhanced my findings.

Through reviewing the pilot study experiences, I learnt a great deal about culture-sensitive ethical issues in research. My awareness of research ethics, confidentiality, and consent became more pronounced. I ensured that all participants felt comfortable and safe throughout the process. The pilot study helped build my methodological confidence and greatly enhanced my ability to develop research tools that were both purposeful and appropriate for Nepal's educational context.

The implications of the pilot study went beyond the modification of methodology. The results showed that students' perceptions of the SEE system, its grading system, and assessment procedures were still limited. This finding had implications for teachers, educationalists, policymakers, and agencies involved in improving educational assessments. The lessons learned from the pilot study informed the design of the main research, which became an exploratory study involving larger groups of students and teachers from six other schools, as well as the participation of the District Education Office (DEO) in Chitwan. The interview questions were carefully drafted for DEO and CGO

following the focus group sessions to elicit valuable policy-level insights from students' perspectives, as shared with their teachers.

The purpose of the main study was to provide practical recommendations for the effective implementation of the SEE system. The findings and recommendations from this research were expected to inform key educational policy frameworks, such as Nepal's School Sector Reform Plan (SSRP) and National Education Sector Plan (NESP). The outcomes of the study were also expected to be particularly valuable to the Ministry of Education, non-governmental and voluntary organisations, as well as international partners and donor agencies, including the World Bank, the British Council, and partner countries such as China, Korea, the United States, Japan, and the United Kingdom, by supporting evidence-informed educational policy and practice. It was hoped that these contributions would assist organizations and policymakers in making effective and meaningful improvements to educational quality, fairness, and inclusivity in Nepal. Now, the next section will describe the findings of the main study.

4.2 Findings of the Main Study

In this section of the chapter, I present findings from 8 focus group discussions (FGDs) with students, 4 FGDs with teachers, 8 FGDs with students and 2 semi-structured interviews with government officials to provide additional perspectives on students' and teachers' experiences of SEE. The study describes the mixed experiences of students, teachers, and government officials. The findings drawn from the multiple key themes and sub- themes of the SEE system, exploring impact, opportunities, and challenges according to the objective of the study, are triangulated. To protect the confidentiality of all participants, I have coded the four schools involved in this study as A, B, C, and D, with schools A and B public and schools C and D private. Student participants were coded accordingly which each code has reflected the school student participants of 8 FGDs as following; A1S, B1S, C1S, D1S, A2S, B2S, C2S, D2S, A3S, B3S, C3S, D3S, A4S, B4S, C4S, D4S, A5S, B5S, C5S, D5S, A6S, B6S, C6S, D6S, A7S, B7S, C7S, D7S, A8S, B8S, C8S, D8S. Similarly, each FGD group had 6-8 group members.

Similarly, teacher participants were coded reflecting their school FGD (4 F) and their role as a teacher as follow: A1T, B1T, C1T, D1T, A2T, B2T, C2T, D2T, A3T, B3T, C3T, D3T, A4T, B4T, C4T, D4T, A5T, B5T, C5T, D5T, A6T, B6T, C6T, D6T, A7T, B7T, C7T, D7T, A8T, B8T, C8T, D8T.In the same way, each group of teachers had 8 members.

Moreover, a government official is represented as DEO, the district education officer, who is also a local government official (LGO), and as CGO, a central government official, as described previously.

The objective of the study was to address the recognised knowledge gap regarding the opportunities and challenges posed by SEE and how students and teachers experience its implementation. The study is directed by the research questions presented in Chapter One, which examine students' and teachers' experiences of the SEE grading system, its perceived advantages and disadvantages, the challenges associated with its operation, and the extent to which issues identified under the previous SLC system have been resolved.

Therefore, students' quotes are colour-coded sky blue, teachers' quotes are colour-coded peach, and Government officials' quotes are colour-coded light pink. Each key theme is described by sub-themes, providing participants' phenomenal raw quotes, which are organised as follows.

4.2.1 Opportunities from SEE

The data analysis suggests that, overall, the SEE system has several positive aspects noted by both private- and public-school students and teachers. These positive aspects ranged from decreases in exam failure rates and exam pressure to psychological relief, increased student confidence, and greater support from teachers.

4.2.2 Decrease in Exam Failure Rates

One of the most important positive aspects for participants was the reduced failure rates on examinations. The grading scheme, as part of SEE, virtually eliminated the concern of failing, which was significant under the SLC scheme. Both public and private school students recognised this, commenting that the absence of a failing grade relieved much of the pressure the examinations placed on them. The responses from these teachers and students suggested that students are now more likely to continue their education without the disruption of having to repeat grades due to exam failures.

Here is some evidence from my study:

*I like SEE because you get chance to study up to class 12 and you don't fail the exam. There is no fair or failure. (*B2S)

One student added:

SEE helps to pass the exam even for very weak students by which students don't get depressed. (C1S)

Teachers from public schools stated:

*It has ended the situation not to go for further study only because getting fail in the exams. In any subject, whatsoever is the performance of the students, according to his capacity, it has opened the ways and doors for students. I think this is very positive side of SEE. (*A1T)

Similarly, CGO shared his views.

on reduce in exam failure rate as *Wastages means fail. We had system where, if you don't get 32 marks, students fail. But now it is not like this, in grading if you get grade in any 3–4 subjects like English, Math, Science, he/she should be able to go for further study... in year 11 unlike in SLC.*

…

These insights from all concerned stakeholders highlight that the SEE grading system has not only reduced academic pressure but also contributed to building an inclusive educational environment. The findings also suggest that less pressure on students might lead to lower motivation among some students. Hence, there is a critical policy challenge to ensure a reduced failure rate without compromising the quality of education.

4.1.6.1 Opportunities and Advantages Brought About by SEE

The SEE policy has also paved new pathways for students. I could see that in an SLC system, there would be students who would find success difficult and who now had more

Even if students get D plus, they can go to next level which is good aspect of SEE. It opens the opportunity even for academically weak students. (B3S)

No one fails the exam. It creates hope for the students that they can go for further education. (D1S)

equal opportunity for success. Being able to enjoy more freedoms with grades, such as less punishment for privileges, created a system where the students were treated more equally. A sense of inclusivity for students who are recognised as stronger in other disciplines but are held up by those in which they are perceived to be weak allowed the students to progress and move on with their work without penalty. The SEE presents students, along with their regular Grade 12 academic courses, with options for technical and other vocational pathways that were not offered in the previously existing pathways of learning and outcomes of the SEE. This is valuable for some students who may otherwise likely struggle in populated classrooms. Therefore, here is some evidence:

Similarly, a teacher and Deo shared their voice on:

*SEE has opened the door for students to go to different faculties such as science, commerce, humanities etc. We should take those as benefits of SEE system. (*CT3)

DEO Unit Chief shared his experience regarding the opportunity brought by SEE.

SEE exam systemhelps students to get the employment opportunities in international level and in context of Nepal... this can be seen as qualification test exam for the employment. In another hand, SEE is a main foundation or base to produce national human resources such as doctor and engineers in future. (DEO)

These collective perspectives of the students, teachers and government officials have clearly mentioned that the SEE system has created many opportunities for the students by reducing the failure rate and offering large numbers of pathways, but the critical question is on the sustainability of the whole process, as passing all students reduces the stress level and increases participation. However, achieving meaningful learning outcomes is challenging, and the policymaker needs to be serious and develop a balanced approach.

4.1.6.2 Reduction in Exam Results Pressure and Psychological Relief

The term “Iron Gate” was historically used to explain students’ difficulty in passing the School Leaving Certificate (SLC- the previous examination system). At that time, the pass rate across the country was just 55%. This examination system had put much psychological pressure on students, and the students’ suicide tendency was also increasing. In this context, the introduction of the SEE system brought much relief to the students; therefore, most

participants agree that it has reduced exam-result pressure and provided psychological relief.

Here is one piece of evidence from a student:

*Suicidal rate has gone down, and it has now created united group within friends as everyone passes easily, less unhealthy competitions. (*D5S)

Suicide rate has gone down… parents are happy as we pass easily, we are happy and teachers too. (C6S)

This is a perspective shared by a student who had recently completed the SEE exam and was enrolled in Year 11 at the same school in the new academic year.

I had a wonderful experience. At the beginning, I had a little bit of fear, thinking how everything would be, but while I started giving the exam, I realized that it was not hard as I used to think. I had over all good experience and easy to pass (D1S)

This quote illustrates a change in a student's emotional response before and after the exam. Initially, the student exhibits anxiety towards the exam, which is typical for a high-stakes exam. However, once the exam began, the fear quickly gave way to confidence. This quote would appear to suggest that the SEE reduced the negative psychological burden that students usually experience regarding national exams. Also, this would indicate a better match between a student's preparation and the expectations of their assessment, making it feel more attainable.

Other students added:

The SEE exam system is good. There is a GPA system, and I feel teachers are giving more importance to the students, which I find good. (B2S)

Here, the student connects the grading structure (GPA system) to a greater focus and engagement from teachers. The GPA system seems to have helped create a classroom culture where teachers put helping students succeed first. This comment suggests that SEE might be evolving towards a teaching philosophy that focuses more on students' needs. This could lead to deeper relationships between teachers and students and support systems that affect mental health.

One student sees this as opportunity, as she got extra support while preparing through SEE examinations:

The teachers our school helped us a lot during the exam period. They gave us practice materials and worked through difficult topics with us. This made the exams feel more manageable (B2S)

Many students said they believed they were successful in the SEE system because of the additional guidance and support provided by teachers. More specifically, students said teachers supported them with exam preparation and grading under SEE, as well as in other degrees; teachers in public schools were supportive in helping students understand their tasks and were well prepared for their examinations.

One more student emphasised teachers' support during the examination period as commendable:

Our teachers provided us with all the resources we needed, and they made sure we understood everything before the exams. I felt confident because of their support (A1S)

This quote points to more tangible academic support. The students see their teachers taking a proactive role in reducing uncertainty about the exam content. The students outlined how the teachers lowered emotional and cognitive barriers by providing practice-based materials and individually supporting and guiding students. These actions demonstrate how institutional support throughout an examination period can help reduce student stress, which is pertinent to the larger narrative of psychological relief found through the SEE.

One of the students summed up their experience in just three words, and most students agreed that SEE exams are designed to be passed. However, the remaining minority students disagreed with this.

It is easy to pass. (C4S)

This quote generalised this student's perception of the SEE experience. Moreover, it also revealed a common theme I observed in the field while collecting data: most students shared the same perception.

One more student stated:

The good thing is we don't fail. In the previous exam system, students used to fail, and they had to lose a year, but now we have no fear of failure. (A1S)

Overall, this statement reveals apparent relief and a reduction in academic pressure among some students under the new SEE (Secondary Education Examination) system. The participant indicates that the SEE system marks a dramatic transition from the former SLC system, as the SLC was a high-stakes exam and many students repeated a year because they failed.

When the participant states that they have no fear of failure, it conveys an emotional/psychological effect of the grading system because students do not have the burden of being labelled a failure (both a consequence of the previous high-stakes nature of the SLC) that might produce positive as well as negative outcomes:

On the positive side, they would have less anxiety and better their wellness because it is less fearful (and arguably, it is seen as more equitable), showing a trend toward more inclusive and less punitive assessment practices.

In addition, the teacher shares their experiences:

Students have been fearless in this grading system. Students used to have lots of fear about the exam results, since there is no fail and none of the students will be called fail students, students have been stressed free, which is one of the advantages of this system (DT2)

*In previous exam system, students' main concern was only about results. They were more result orientated, however now more than that students have been more creative and less stressed, which has helped them to be more productive. (*DT1)

These were comments from Government officials, which are as follows:

Previously, we participated in SLC exams and many of the students used to fail. They used to get depression. But now with SEE, hardly any students have got feeling of not being able to do well. Majority have got feeling of passing the exam and they have got an opportunity for further study……. At least, they have got an opportunity. (DEO)

Similarly, there are all three types of participants that have a say on a student's confidence level.

4.1.6.3 Confidence Levels of Students

Another positive efficacy of the SEE system is that the confidence of students is reported to have increased. The data also reflects a significant reduction in the fear of failure that sits whenever the SLC system matures. Now, students feel more confident about their studies and exams because there is more than one time that they can succeed, and they are more lenient in their grading, as it takes the overall student learning outcome. Increased confidence translates into increased academic performance and attitudes to schools and education.

Here are some quotes that show high confidence from the students.

During the SEE exam we did hard work, we spent time with our friends and teachers which I liked. (C1S)

Similarly, A student expressed a transition from low confidence to high confidence.

At the time of studying, I found it a bit difficult but later I got better GPA than the test exam. I liked it. (B1S)

Two students expressed opposite experiences, and two expressed mixed experiences.

My experience was not good, because unexpected questions were asked. I struggled to understand the question. (D3S)

We are not able to understand our real capability, which is challenging. Result says A plus, whether it is 91 or 99, we do not have that information. (D1S)

In one side I have experience good and, in another side, experienced bad... I was expecting more than 3 GPA, but I did not get that. (A6B)

But later I realised, if I had studied well, even I could come out with much better result. I

On the negative side, the relaxed environment might discourage students from taking their academics seriously, as they may be less inclined to seek excellence because they perceive the risk of failure as low, which aligns with other data showing that students acknowledged they studied less because they knew they wouldn't fail.

A teacher commented as fear free:

Students have been fear-free in this grading system. Students used to have lots of fear about the exam results since there is no failure and none of the students will be called a failed student. Students have been less stressed, which is one of the advantages of this system. (D2T)

This teacher focused on the emotional and psychological outcomes of SEE grading and indicated that the exclusion of the label fail has removed the stigma of academic result, which also minimized exam-related anxiety. Using the term "fear-free" has prompted a considerable shift in student perception, moving from stress and fear of failure to emotional security. By "fear-free," he also meant to suggest a benefit associated with the SEE system, especially in Nepal's socio-cultural context.

For example, when a student experiences academic failure, there is often a social stigma attached to it in Nepal. The teacher clearly indicated that reducing a person's stress is not merely a product outcome for SEE grading, but a key value of SEE grading.

In my view this grading system is new system in context of Nepal. In percentage system students used to fail, however in this new grading system students have got the mindset that they will not get fail in the exam which has increased the confidence level of the students. (A3T)

In other words, as indicated by this quote, policy changes have a transformative effect on students' psychological development. As stated by the teacher, the policy was culturally significant as it changed the paradigm of an evaluation driven by percent to an evaluation (SEE) that provided an assuredness for students based on their performance; therefore, the SEE system was motivating whereas the previous percent-based system evoked a fear of failure. The mindset ("they won't fail") represents a fundamental change in students' perceptions about achieving success on tests; as such, students now express confidence. The results of the study demonstrate the ability of grading reform to provide positive effects on students' motivation, and thus allow students to proceed with confidence in their pursuit of higher education.

I would like to answer this question in one sentence, Previously, SLC was called IRON GATE, however after the implementation of this SEE system, that gate has been transformed into WOODEN DOOR. That is the biggest change. ……. the way importance used to be given to SLC exams from the concerned stakeholders like parents, government, teachers and students, it had increased the suicide rate and the frustration among the students and this new SEE system has addressed this problem to some extent…….. But it is not like that it has completely resolved these issues… .....Yes, it is a reality that after the implementation of SEE, dropout rate has decreased, suicide rate has gone down, and rate of failure has also decreased. There is no fail in SEE, everyone gets the pass certificate, one who get higher GPA, gets certificate of higher GPA and the one who get lower GPA, get certificate of lower GPA. SEE system has improved many seen and unseen micro level problem, which was in existence during the previous SLC system such as commercialization of education, unfair competition among the educational institutions, tendency to admit the child in boarding school… (A1T)

The quote from the teacher, like the previous SLC system to an iron gate and the current SEE system to a wooden door, provides a strong metaphor for the perceived shift in Nepal's education measurement/assessment framework. In doing so, it captures a transformation in thinking about exam-based assessment, moving from a rigid, high-stakes examination approach to one that is flexible, inclusive, and accessible. The quote points to the amount of psychological pressure that the previous SLC system put on students, which often had extreme outcomes, including increased suicide rates and teacher burnout for teachers who taught core subjects such as Math, Science, and English. Conversely, the SEE system eliminates the notion of failure; has a grading structure; and has reduced student dropout rates and mental distress. Similarly, the DEO's perspectives, expressed by the DEO, clearly support the view that the SEE system has emotional and structural advantages over the previous SLC exam. Several implications emerge

Previously, we participated in SLC exams and many of the students used to fail. They used to get depression. But, now with SEE, hardly any students have got feeling of not being able to do well. Majority have got feeling of passing the exam and they have got an opportunity for further study. (DEO)

Reduced Psychological Stress: The shift from a pass/fail system to a grading system has reduced fear and anxiety among many students. There were instances of prior students being depressive or suicidal once they failed due to depression. Students who may have previously thought they were failing now see themselves progressing even if they are not achieving top marks, which provides emotional security.

Perception of Success: In our discussions with students, there was a perceptual shift, especially for mid-performing and low-performing students, who no longer felt that they would not be successful. This perception motivates students, while also providing a way for low-performing students to remain engaged in education.

Students who are little bit weaker or medium level students have got perception that they won't fail. (DEO)

If one student is very good in all subjects but he is weak in math for example, he must struggle whole life to pass the exam only because of math... In previous system (SLC) it was not available... This is an important aspect of SEE. (DEO)

Inclusion of Advancement: The DEO also highlights that students who excel in some subjects (such as science or accounting) or do not do well in others (such as math) have new ways to advance without being completely prevented from doing so. The SEE system removes the all-or-nothing assertion of the SLC and better reflects the learning profiles present across society.

There are numerous examples where students get suicide because of one simple mistake... To minimize these issues indicates the efficient management system. (DEO)

Social Effects: The quote regarding the number of suicide reports a reduction in cases of suicide indicates that SEE positively impacted students' psyche and overall general well-being. This implies that reforming assessment can influence positive life-altering changes for assessed persons.

Similarly, CGO stated all these quotes which are as follows:

Wastages means fail. We had system where, if you don't get 32 marks, you were failed. But now it is not like this... in grading if you get grade in any 3-4 subjects like English, Math, Science, he/she should be able to go for further study... (CGO)

The statement reflects a systematic change in criteria for student progress. The terminology wastages refer to students that cannot go forward due to failing, a major issue in the previous

Now, the suicide rate, these and that everything has declined, it is like calm before storm. Now students are happy, but if you don't learn good culture some short-term responses are positive... (CGO)

SLC system, as the public official articulated. The official feels the grading system's flexibility may help contribute to reductions dropouts. The notion students can move forward in their education without a requirement to excel in every subject foster's educational inclusion. This could also raise questions about whether students proceeding have the academic skills to be successful at a higher level of education.

The statement recognizes there has been a decline in psychological distress, for example suicide of students are now not linked to academic pressure. While this can be viewed as a positive outcome, the official adds some cautionary notes that surface happiness may lead to deeper issues if not rooted in academia or cultural foundations. While the calm before storm commentary is less than optimistic, it warns (again) that less pressure should not come at an academic price and involved a discipline of seriousness.

The concept of Iron Gate disappeared. Everyone has understood that they are not going to fail. (CGO)

Iron Gate is the SLC exam's representative representation; it is be scared for its academic barrier function in society. The disappearance represents the SEE system that.

Everyone is happy now. No headache to the government. But the impact it will have on the national economy and carrier development is massive. (CGO)

demystifies and levels the playing field for democratizing education access. Students now have confidence in themselves due to the fact they are not going to fail; however, this may be interpreted to imply lessened challenges and/orstakes in which case it could result in loss of student effort and/or seriousness in pursuing their studies.

This statement compares the administrative short- term ease and long-term consideration to development. The SEE system has created peace and settled anxiety amongst students, parents and government, but the official expresses some concern and uncertainty about the long-term consequences to labour market and career readiness. The potential of unlimited promotion and lower academic expectations may create gaps to national skills development potentially impacting economic productivity and tolling competitiveness for future generations.

Participants also expressed agreement on the dissolution of the term "Iron Gate". The quotes are drawn from teacher is given in earlier section with bold word WOODEN DOOR and government officials' quote as

CGO added on:

*Now, the suicide rate, these and that everything has declined, it is like calm before storm. Now students are happy… The concept of Iron Gate disappeared. Everyone has understood that they are not going to fail. (*CGO)

Overall, dissolving the ideas of Iron Gate has significantly reduced the student's psychological pressure; it has hugely contributed to the student's well-being and has increased academic engagements and creativity. However, a small minority of the students still face challenges in the adaptation. The finding also highlights that the teacher's support is essential along with systematic reform.

The transformation from the mindset of Iron Gate to Wooden Gate highlights shifts from the tough assessment system to more flexible and inclusive system, which have contributed to advancing the confidence of the student. However, again the relaxed environment may unintentionally reduce learning attitude of the students.

4.1.6.4 Alternative experiences of students

While the SEE system has been recognized with reducing pressure and stress among students, many expressed concerns about its limitations and the perceived lack of rigor. For some, the system offers benefits in terms of reduced academic stress, but it also raises doubts about the true value of the grading and evaluation process.

Some students expressed that, despite the reduction in pressure being pleasant, the SEE system unintentionally detracted from the completion of academic work.

Even if you get an A plus, it's not seen as an outstanding achievement anymore (C2S).

One student explained he was frustrated when high marks meant less to him and took away a feeling of accomplishment because he felt like the grading system was not as intense and therefore diminished the meaning of excellence.

Some other students expressed concerns that the SEE system had been too lenient, and that passing had diminished the degree to which mastery of actual content might be achievable.

We all pass easily, but it doesn't mean we've really learned a lot. It's too easy (C1S).

This comment embodies a shared sense that the SEE system had, in fact, achieved the goal of more students passing - but not necessarily that the students have acquired useful knowledge and are gaining skill.

Another student offered a diverse view regarding the uncertainty of the grading system related to students' preparedness to push themselves academically:

Sometimes it feels like no matter what grade we get; it doesn't really matter. The grading doesn't tell us how well we've done compared to before (D4S).

However, the SEE system is recognized to reduce the pressure and stress that students feel, many students expressed that they did feel uncomfortablewith certain characteristics of the SEE system, and as well that they felt it was less rigorous. Because there is no clear delineation between levels of achievement, some students also felt uncertain about how they were doing academically and what the grades meant.

For some students, while the SEE System reduced some academic pressure relieving the stress, they had feelings of insecurity about the actual value of the grading and evaluation. Several students stated that while they valued some relief from pressure, the SEE system also unintentionally devalued the level of success that students presumed with academic success.

*Honestly, even if you get an A plus, it isn't a big accomplishment anymore (C*2S).

This student expressed annoyance about the amount of weight that a high grade used to convey or even the garnered sense of achievement when there were higher thresholds for accolades.

Some students worried that the SEE system has made coursework too lax, and students can pass without understanding the course content.

We all pass with marginal (even high) grades - but we didn't learn that much. It's just too easy. (C1S)

This statement suggested a common feeling that the SEE system continued to allow an increased number of students pass but certainly not that they have been able to learn a significant amount or develop their critical thinking skills.

Yet another student noted that the ambiguity of the grading, in terms of their own motivation to encourage themselves to excel is reduced:

Sometimes feels like we can lose or get whatever grade we want even perhaps best because not a lot of emphasis on what we did compared to before. Not that the grading is that useful (D4S).

As a result of not having a clear remarkable standard, some students reported they did not have a good sense what their own progress was (level of differentiation) of the meaning behind their grades. Here a student is trying to say the importance of well-defined rubric which SEE is does not have.

4.1.6.5 Continuous Assessment and Fairer Evaluation

Continuous assessment and fairer assessment mean assessment over time, repeatedly and through various ways or measures, when using various ways or measures, to promote a more equitable - transparent - and true representation of learning.

A student sharing his experience:

They are assessing by observing the students' capacity. (B3S)

This demonstrated assessment that is formative and based on capacity, which is congruent with the continuous assessment and fairer assessment values.

Moreover, another student added:

The teachers would just give us medium range marks so that we would want to study harder. (C5S)

This demonstrated the teacher used marks with a specific intent; this was about continuous assessment feedback - promoting ongoing improvement.

On the contrary, a student expressed that.

We just really don't know what our real marks are... we are unable to understand our real mark capacity. (D1S)

This shows a lack of transparency that is indicative of a lack of assessment that is continuous and fair.

Similarly,8 out of 13 students in from 2 FGDs group agreed on this and expresses this.

We have no idea... we did not care about this to be honest. (overall, two groups of Focus group students responded so)

Indifference to evaluation process - critically minimal effort, low interest or engagement, and no constructive tracking for the same purposes that undermine fairer and continuous assessment. This process, I observe as cultural differences as student or young children are not commonly ask for their opinion in Nepal, this may be the reason they do have the answer for this which is explained later in the chapter about my observation on students' participation.

One teacher expressed his view on fairer evaluation system of SEE as

…… Recently, one student did suicide saying that he didn't get the GPA as he supposed to get. Here, the issue, which we must notice, is, how weak the government mechanism is…….. there was an incident with a girl of Jhapa district, before the suicide, government published her one results and after her suicide published the improved results where she scored her expected GPA.

Mistakes, it happens because this system made by human, but my point is there shouldn't be negligence. Sometimes some genuine mistakes happen because of the system errors, those are the different issues…

This quotes highlights teacher's worries regarding the fairness and trustworthiness(reliability)

of the SEE grading system. The participant acknowledged that while human error is unavoidable, weaknesses in administrative processes and overdue correction mechanisms may have serious costs, emphasizing the need for greater responsibility and quality pledge within the examination system.

…. Would like to point out another thing as well, on the day of SLC results out, the teachers of Science, English and Math used to get high pressure, it used to create the situation to give up from the job…This profession, itself is stressful profession. Whatever others say, teachers only know the life he is living with the pressure. In SLC system, schools used to get poor results in Math, English and Science since these were a difficult subject, and everyone (students, parents, government) were upon the teachers of these subjects.
……. Yes, another thing, which people don't understand, is to teach one period means he spends 45 minutes in a class, it counts same energy as a man spend walking the distance of 6 kilometers. Suppose a teacher teaches 5 periods in a day; he spent energy of crossing 30 kilometers distance in a day. The concerned stakeholders have never pay attention in these genuine and serious problems of the teachers… (A1T)

This quotation exemplifies the emotional and professional burden placed on teachers under the SEE system. The participant labelled how examination results generate intense pressure, particularly for Mathematics, Science, and English teachers, while also emphasising that the physical and psychological stresses of teaching remain unknown by educational stakeholders.

Learning should be measured in grading... Grading helps to differentiate the student's level. Learning and grading are integrated with each other. (C3T)

This quotation reproduces the belief that grading helps as an important indicator of students' learning and achievement**.** The participant regarded grading as a vital mechanism for differentiating students' academic performance, suggesting that learning and assessment are closely interrelated within the SEE system.

Nevertheless, the teacher also admits that conditions have not entirely improved, citing extreme tragedies as a student suicide from a mark allocation error: an indictment of the government for weak implementation and oversight. Interestingly, the quotation adds to the notion of fairness in evaluation in its consideration of teacher well-being by recognizing that teaching is both emotionally and physically demanding and largely unconsidered by policymakers. Overall, this evidence underpinned both the theoretical principles of ongoing evaluation and fairer evaluation is simply not enough but it needs to fairer process to cut down teacher's labour too by his powerful metaphor of teaching 45 mins is equivalent to walking 6 kilometres daily and we teach 5 classes a day of 45 mins means we walk 30 km per day; and it revealed still practical and moral failures that need to be addressed to realize its potential.

Similarly, a teacher shared his view as this represents an acceptance and understanding of using assessment as an ongoing process to track the progress and capability of students.

This system is better than the previous one. It reduces pressure and focuses more on students' performance. (A6T)

This quote is indicative of the formative philosophy behind ongoing assessment where stress is reduced, and an assessment of performance is possible over a period.

Furthermore, a teacher highlights his views on how SEE has made student at ease.

…. which *the students' drop out situation has ended, literacy rate has increased and after SEE if students don't want to pursue higher education, they have got options to go for technical or skilful sector which is very positive aspects of SEE(A1T) …*

The teacher is confident about the SEE if a good system been implemented for students.

Even academically very poor students have achieved 25 out of 25 marks in practical... which is unfair to the better students(D6T)

One the other hand, he also emphasized the low-grade achiever has option to get enrolled in year 11 and vocational courses which is conducted by the board call CTEVT in Nepal (for example like hairdresser, Barista, sort courses on fashion designing, plumbing, to be an electrician. Compared to SLC it has been more inclusive towards the low-grade achiever student whereas in SLC student had wait for 3 months for supplementary exams and a year if they fail few subjects. This has been resolved in SEE.

On the contrary, the teacher also added this.

This quote highlights the unfair inflation of internal assessment marks and undermines the legitimacy of formative assessment. And it reveals the truth that practical exams are no longer practical in the real world.

To support this quote, there is other evidence from the study as follows

Another participant mentioned that practical exams were conducted in all subjects except marks, and all students were given full marks (25 out of 25). This practice aimed to help students achieve a higher GPA. (D4T)

One participant expressed dissatisfaction with the way practical exams were conducted in the SEE system. They argued that although labelled as practical exams, there were no actual practical activities involved. They believed that the exams did not meet the standards of practical assessments. (D3T)

A computer teacher shared their experience with the practical exams in the previous SLC system, and the changes brought about by the SEE system. They mentioned that in the past, practical exams were conducted systematically and fairly with all computer teachers coming together. However, under the SEE system, they were asked to conduct practical exams internally, and they speculated that budgeting or managerial issues might be the reasons behind this change. Consequently, they had the freedom to set the questions for the practical exams and assign marks as they deemed appropriate. (D2T)

Therefore, Teachers' views shared by D2T, D3T, and D4T shed light on significant issues surrounding the validity and fairness of practical assessments under the SEE system; the

views of D2T, a teacher of computers, reflect how practical exams were delivered as part of a unified group and a measurement of assessment in the SLC era, which suggests that components were standardised to ensure equity and validity. In contrast, practical assessments under the SEE system are delivered individually and internally, with teachers designing their questions and allocating marks, making the assessment context more complex. Such potentially decreasing standardisation is also, based on winding institutional process of considering whether the SEE system represents the beginning of either a new kind of educational management system or simply the last vestige of normal practice for educational management in Nepal.

D4T, who revealed they give students full marks (25/25) in each practical subject, demonstrates how practical exam assessment has also become nominal, with the whole purpose now simply a score on a GPA that does not measure any real competencies for students. Even more worrying is D3T's suggestion that most of the so-called practical exams have not involved any authentic practical examination or hands-on component and therefore directly contradict the very meaning of a practical exam. Overall, the three perspectives present a situation where, theoretically, the SEE system is tasked with carrying out formative and summative continuous and inclusive assessment of students in practice; however, such process seems to be simply of capitalization, reduced validity, or implementation with an aim of eventually doing something without either having any sincerity, merit, or value of authentic, equitable, and legitimate assessment goals.

In the same way, a teacher highlighted the practical realities of SEE examination as experienced on ground.

I already used one word 'Kripanka', means sympathy marks. But it's not like that,

Students have invested 10 years in education. The mark he gets is the outcomes of his 10 years of labour; however, it needs to be managed properly. The way we have been giving practical marks has improved our subject-wise result system, which is positive thing, however the very important question is what is the purpose of practical exams?

It is to make skilled based, isn't it? Students learn what they learn as theory in classroom, which needs to apply in practical life and the practical exams help to do so. Practical marks consist of 25 marks out of 100, which is a considerable mark. In some of the subjects, it
talks about project work……..

Yes, it is, there are some project works to do like to go in community, talk about their social problems, and find out the situation of human trafficking and other social issues. If we principally apply this system, student can easily adjust in his society, it helps student to know his society closely and he can make his concrete perception towards the society where he is living……..

The problem is implementation, teacher's forwardness and willingness to implement is another problem. Since the marking is done internally by their class teacher, there might be biasness, as teacher knows all his students. It would be more effective if there had been

This is a critique, but by direct contrast supports the notion that continuous assessment is intended to practice but it is not practiced currently.

Participant A1T seized the opportunity to illuminate the subtleties of the SEE system, particularly regarding its practical exam, and while practical assessments showed some promise, the current design was not sufficient. The comment of Kripanka or sympathy marks speaks to the importance and intentionality of measuring a compassionate grade versus a fair, fair-minded grade that acknowledges skill or achievement. It is important to acknowledge all of what is possible for someone to achieve, and while practical marks did serve to elevate overall subject results, the participant examined if practical marks should be elevated to that status-we(teachers) are passing from theoretical knowledge to real world skills. The ideal situation the participant referred to, having students work on actual topics in the community related to real world problems like human trafficking, connects a continuous aspect of assessment across fairness, while also bringing social awareness and actual skills through experiential learning projects.

The participant also recognized that practical exams were not consistently applied from teacher to teacher, plus the marking bias created by specifically marking their own students

takes away from the authenticity. There is a risk of bias against your own class, and the involvement of a third-party examiner was a suggestion of legitimate rationale for fairer and credible findings. In conclusion, the participants reflective commentary shows that while there are some innovative aspects of the SEE system in respect to formative assessment and skills assessment; the outcomes of this type of assessment rely on several factors: full implementation of the SEE system; consistent implementation of the SEE system; and a consistent standard and accountability protocols, otherwise, the contention of equity and legitimate continuous assessment is lost.

Government Official (DEO) imposed this expression as head of district:

Evaluation provides feedback... and teachers should give feedback at all levels positively. (DEO)

DEO very explicit support for formative feedback evaluation - this is part of continuous assessment.

In the same way he also expressed his view on it:

Evaluation is a defined channel for portfolio... track students one by one... the grade is a simple conversion of numbers collected. (DEO)

Conversely,

There is no portfolio. Just gives us graded converted marks. The teachers receive no training. This is a disjointed mess. (CGO)

The CGO statement greatly criticizes the current evaluation process for being confused and unfair. The statement highlights the lack of ongoing assessment via portfolios, highly dependence on numeric grades, and lack of teacher training, which ultimately create an uncoordinated and non-continuous assessment method that does not embody the core concepts of a fair and formative evaluation.

All the ideas shared by the stakeholders of this study portray that SEE system is a progressive idea. However, for its successful implementation it requires transparency and accountability with the assessment validity and the real student's outcomes rather than just the theoretical benefits.

4.1.6.6 Inequality in Resources and Learning Environments

The two student participants from a rural school complained about inadequate basic infrastructure in the exam centre they went to for the SEE exam and lack of basic infrastructure in their own school, which was a source of discomfort.

There was not good toilet in our exam centre, not even here in school (A3S, A4S)

The above quote was mentioned while taking the interview as a complaint of students about the lack of basic physical infrastructure. If students have inadequate facilities, such as toilets that do not function, especially during critical times such as exams, it may undermine their dignity and comfort and have a direct impact on their performance, attention, and well-being. The quote shows a letdown in delivering at least minimally acceptable guidelines for educational spaces, particularly in disordered, under-resourced public schools.

There are no references in the quote to indicate that this is the one-off situation of a single exam centre - the condition exists equally in both the home school and the exam centre, and this implies systemic infrastructure gaps. The inadequate provision of basic infrastructure such as toilets, continue to deepen the educational divide between students in well-resourced urban schools and their peers in rural schools without opportunity. It also shows the government has failed to support equitable physical learning contexts as part of fair education. In this sense, even the most thoughtful evaluation regime, including SEE, is at risk if students are not given the bare minimum to support their achievement.

One of the students highlighted the issue what they are experiencing for the need of grading transparency.

……. We *can't see the exact numbers that we have received in every subject... It would be good if we could see the numbers received. (D1S)*

Although this quote illustrates a lack of transparent communication about grading, and even for students in urban schools, at least grades and GPA are disclosed, students are not

given the raw marks, nor the basis for that grade or GPA, and therefore do not understand how their grade or GPA is determined, nor can they trust what they are given…. This near-zero likelihood of transparency in reporting, even in the most disadvantaged schools, adds a further dimension of confusion for students seeking to understand their own performance. A student added.

The student's difficulty in understanding the grading cut-off and GPA mapping indicates a conceptual gap, for example, due to unhelpful explanations by teachers or a lack of orientation in public schools. This illuminates inequities in pedagogical support and the way information might be delivered, disadvantaging students in government schools even if operating within the same curriculum framework.

In most of the subjects there is practical marks... however, there are some subjects which doesn't have practical marks. (B2S)

While this quotation demonstratesa lack of open communication about grading, and even for students in any schools (either urban or rural) when at least grades and GPA are disclosed to students, students are not offered grades, nor raw marks, nor explained the basis of that grade or GPA, and so have no context for understanding how and whereby that grade or GPA is arrived at, and therefore cannot trust what they are given. Almost zero likelihood of transparency in reporting, even in the most disadvantaged of schools, adds an additional layer of confusion for students trying to understand the nature of their performances as learners.

Moreover, a teacher underlines his view:

This evaluation system in letter grading system is in SEE, 11, 12 and higher education and now in class 8... there may be problems of electricity, issues of technician... I challenge; there is problem. (D1T)

The teacher also noted that the technological infrastructure of schools is highly variable, particularly at the primary level of education. It is possible for some schools to apply the letter grading system using digital software, while other schools do not have, or simply do not have, electricity/trained staff, and therefore cannot use letter-grading practices systematically. Here, I see structural inequality, where the sound technical system becomes useless because the context does not have the resources.

There is another evidence as a teacher in rural school highlighted as.

… This evaluation system in letter grading system is in SEE, 11, 12 and higher education and now in class 8. There is no provision of publishing results in letter grading system in other classes like class 6, class 7, class 5 and so on. If there is software system available in some schools, that's different story. But in other schools, there may be problem of electricity, issues of technicians and I am sure because of these various issues schools do not publish results in letter grading system. I challenge; there is problem…

Because of this, even though this evaluation system isa good system, it has been very difficult to implement in full flagged in Nepal. There is a problem on effective implementation because of the lack of resources, manpower and the lack of understating as well .....in secondary schools like ours, not only, in other schools too there is no problem But in Basic level schools, they do have this kind of problems to publish results based on this system or something like that; in majority of the school, they do have these problems… Yes, no practical exams; this is the practices what all the schools have been doing now (A1T*)……..*

This highlight represents a basic challenge to the equitable application of Nepal's letter grading evaluation system: relative access to resources, especially in rural schools, specifically for secondary schools in connection to basic-level schools. The letter-grading system had been put into place for grades 8, 10 (SEE), 11, and 12, but many schools still battle the minimal needed supports (electricity, digital software, technical support, etc.) to ensure fair application of these practices in lower grade levels such as 5, 6, and 7. It was appropriate for the participant to emphasise that, while the intent of the evaluation model is theoretically sound, its practical application is most often extremely inequitable, and in many schools either inconsistent or not at all. The way that the participant provided descriptions of schools in Nepal makes visible a disconnected learning universe, where students in some schools experienced structured and equitable assessment processes, but other students experienced informal and inconsistent assessment practices

The way the participant described schools in Nepal reveals a disconnected learning universe, where students in some schools experienced structured and equitable assessment processes, while others experienced informal and inconsistent assessment practices.

The quote illustrates that in basic-level schools there's often no use of practical exams, and for final outcomes only marks were recorded, which is an unethical expediency in assessments, undermines assessment integrity, and can be used as a violation of equity.

The participants' attempt to clarify the importance of this issue was made evident in their

In evaluation itself, it does not have any problems, but it depends on the person who implements... it is still in initial phase. (DEO)

challenge; when saying the above quote I challenge, there is a problem. While secondary schools may be experiencing less logistical challenges than basic schools, basic level, the starting point for a child's learning opportunity continues to be taken for granted and continues to underperform as it has done for decades. The quote illustrates that the inequity of resources and technical support in schools is not only just a logistical issue but fundamentally undermines the equitable opportunity for students to receive meaningful education.

Although it is a hopeful statement, it diverts accountability for the policy from the policy to the practice. It recognises that the success of the system will depend on the capacity of local implementers - as capacity variesconsiderably. Therefore, no standard accountability measures will be built into the implementation support provided to districts, thereby adding to environmental and operational inequality in schools.

The DEO recognises the inequity in ongoing professional development, particularly in rural or government schools. Although teacher training is an official expectation, system

Teachers should be updated with the current issues and teaching methods... because of the issues of teachers' adjustment, there are some problems. (DEO)

glitches (such as hurdles in teacher adjustments) mean it is not compliant practice. This creates learning-environment inequity because some teachers use methods relevant to today's schooling, while others do not, affecting the students served by each teacher.

The CGO also recognises inconsistencies in the training, particularly in the letter grades for

Orientation was not enough... Subject teacher doesn't know about this and how can we say, they are orientated. (CGO)

subjects and their interpretation, with hardly any orientation for teachers, making it difficult to implement the grading system consistently, particularly in resource-poor schools with limited support structures. It creates assessment inequalities, impacting the fairness of how consistently students are graded, depending on where they study.

The views of the students, teachers and government officials reveal that resource allocation, along with evaluation and transparency, are intertwined. Therefore, even though SEE aims for a standardised and fair national evaluation system, it lacks those aspects because of the unavailability of infrastructure and poor communications.

4.1.6.7 SEE as a Bridge to Future Choices and Aspirations

The SEE system is about to provide every student to become their own academic and career pathways. SEE, as a grading system, provides clarity about students' strengths and weaknesses, which can support academic decision-making for their onward study and be used as a valuable source of information to help students develop realistic, achievable goals to better prepare for their education and career pathways. Students made reflections about this aspect of SEE - the difficulty in planning their positive development pathways. For example, one student shared - this system has set the target for the subject areas.

The system has set the target for the subject areas. There is a grade required in each subject area to be able to register for the subject, which I studied and found difficult and I liked it (A2S)

and a teacher had similar feedback

in my point of view; in SEE in letter-grading system after the results out student can get the information in which subject he is excellent and in future student can carry his further education in which subject he has done good in school level. I think this is the good thing about SEE (A2T).

The above positive considerations shared by students and teachers present the evidence, SEE has created more opportunities to support students in an inclusive, supportive, and flexible manner. Reduced rates of failure, increased opportunities, reduced stress, increased teacher guidance and learning support, increased student confidence, and more clarity of academic pathways are the shared - positive expressions of a much more positive (and more productive) learning experience.

4.2.3 Challenges in SEE implementation

The SEE system has both positive (e.g., lowers student failure and exam stress) and challenges. These challenges include curriculum design, the grading system, motivating students, and matters of transparency or understanding of the results. These limitations are detailed below, with each of the key issues shown, with quotes from students, teachers, and government officials.

The primary challenges identified during the implementation of the Secondary Education Examination (SEE) are described in this chapter. This was accomplished by gathering opinions from a group of government officials, teachers, and students, and identifying issues related to inadequate teacher training, inadequate standardisation, a mismatch between curriculum and assessments, an urban/rural divide in educational resources, a lack of transparency about assessment and reporting procedures, and inadequate resource support. Although the SEE has improved student performance and reduced the amount of anxiety associated with exams and failures, the problems identified within the

implementation process indicate that there is still room for improvement in terms of preparing, coordinating and communicating to ensure fairness, consistency and the quality of education.

4.2.4 Lack of Understanding of Grading and Assessment.

One major issue has been the students' inability to understand how they are being graded and assessed. Poor students' understanding of grading and assessment reflects poor communication and orientation.

One of the students shared-

> *We honestly do not understand this grading system. The teachers have not instructed us properly regarding this grading system* (A1S)

This direct quote illustrates the direct consequences of teachers not being adequately oriented on the state-mandated grading system. Certainly, the confusion students have about their grades is indicative of a level of incompetence on the part of teachers to be able to share the essential elements of academic assessment. It depicts a chasm between policy and practice, where a grading system is put in place; however, those who intend to be the actants do not have the tools to communicate or actualize the system. Although GPA is among the primary evaluative measures of learning from the system, the teachers missed the opportunity to share that knowledge with the student's learners. The lack of instruction and information provided to students have limited their ability to understand how they were being assessed, embodying feelings of distrust and disconnection. This signifies a failure not only in the design of the system but a failure in the training in upholding the expectations of the system.

> *We don't know how GPA was calculated... our teachers did not teach us* (A2S).

This reflects the same issue as with the earlier school and continues to indicate a knowledge deficit that sits with a teacher's level of knowledge that has not been addressed. Nowhere else in the document is outlined to the extent that students are reporting not thinking about how grading works; this represents a failed system that has no standardization of implementation or training concomitant of school districts. Once again, this threatens the credibility and reliability of the system.

> *I have not properly been told how it works. I just got the results with GPA and then family members guessed what that meant. (*D1S)

This quote provides an emotional and societal context: students do not know how grades are evaluated, nor do parents or communities, as intended to assess students' learning of their academic work through grades. This is more than a failure in communication and training at the institution and community level.

4.2.5 Evidence of lack of training for teachers on SEE

One of the major challenges in implementing the SEE is the lack of standardisation in grading and the inadequate training and instruction provided to teachers. The views shared by the teachers indicate that, while the policy was well designed with a clear intention, its implementation struggled to equip teachers with the required skills and knowledge.

One of the teachers' quotes is as follows:

> *We didn't receive any kind of training from the government. There was no teacher's training programme at all in none of the areas such as in the marking, evaluation and teaching methods. (B1T)*

This quotation highlights the lack of preparatory training before introducing a national-level education reform. It also illustrates a major policy failure: deploying a new system without mentoring those on the front lines. Frontline teachers must improvise ways to mark, evaluate, and teach, as there is no tool that provides them with guidance for this work, leaving them subject to inconsistency and confusion as they attempt to do so. This inconsistency and confusion will undermine the integrity of the entire grading process. This also reflects the problem in governance, where the major reform was launched without proper planning and basic capacity building.

Another teacher added.

> *Implementation of this new system without providing teacher's training is the major weakness of this system. (B5T)*

Linking the comment directly to poor implementation and failure to train draws attention to the disconnect between policy design and practice. It demonstrates that without developing a clear understanding of how the system is supposed to work and the intended objectives, even well-meaning reforms are likely to be poorly interpreted or watered down when implemented in practice. It also illustrates the frustration and powerlessness felt by teachers who have been given new tasks and responsibilities with little support towards implementation.

Similarly, the teacher has expressed himself so;

No one was given training. We have been teaching from our self-study knowledge, which we acquired from the newspaper and other media. (B6T)

It is an indication of institutional inertia to observe the national education policy being rolled out across newspapers. This statement shows how informal, not officially controlled, second-hand knowledge has supplanted formal professional development, and assumed a fragmentary and inaccurate comprehension of what grading principles are. It reflects systemic organizational mismanagement that has the potential to erode quality teaching and the adverse application of assessment standards.

Further evidence from teacher indicates-

This system implemented without any kind of teacher's training which is the biggest weakness of the government... Fromthe government side still, training has not been given. (C3T)

This strong formal accusation demonstrates real frustration with implementation. Here we are, 3 years into implementation and there still is no systematic training which signifies that this is a reactive governance model and not a proactive one; it also signifies a systemic

Government has not given training even to 100 teachers in a whole country. This system was forcefully implemented. (C5T)

lack of accountability from policymakers, which breeds distrust from the education practitioners. If implementation does not come with standardization, the confusion between theory and practice begins to widen.

This dramatic statement also highlights the emptiness of the training vacuum. This suggests it means that less than a small fraction of a percent of teachers was formally ready to address the grading system - a glaring omission of basic support and essentials. It supports the argument that the reform was not concerned with outcomes, as it involved nothing more than the processes - rolled out without reference to capacity or legibility.

We haven't been given any training. Whatever we have learnt, it's all from self-study. (D2T)

This reflects the message from other schools and expresses the theme that most teachers enacted the grading system without any institutional guidance or support. This statement highlights how their autonomy was pushed and not cultivated, and teachers were left to

figure out a national restructure on their own which could prompt errors or misalignment. One teacher shared her experience on teachers training.

Government should take the top-down approach in teachers training; however, we haven't received any training. Since we haven't been provided training, we get confusion in which way to teach students. (D1T)

This statement identifies a structural limitation: there is no clear, consolidated communication and training approach. The very uncertainty that is experienced at the ground level, where there are no formal directions to curriculum, shows variability in every school. When there is no means of standardized pedagogical framework across the schools, we leave open an opportunity for an inequity into school and teachers; undermining the very equity for schools and teachers that we advocate for with the SEE grading system.

I have not received any. It is essential to have teachers training, however, in my knowledge, I have not seen and heard any teachers been given training from the government. (B6T)

During the conversation with the public-school teachers 12 out of 12 participants said no training on evaluation, marking was provided to us from the Government sides. It was all done through self-learning. This reinforces the failure across the board to plan for inclusion of training. The quote implies that even knowledge of training was absent. In such a situation, it is easy for teachers to feel excluded from the policy decision that affects their work and their student's academic lives. The same quote also indicates a possible unevenness in how the busy policy is communicated depending on where one fits into the system, regionally and/or institutionally.

While teachers expressed their dissatisfaction regarding the training provided to them and perspective of the government provides a different picture on SEE implementation.

DEO expressed about SEE being initial phase of implementation….

In initial days, CDC Curriculum Development Centre had made packages... probably we couldn't do it on a large scale, however we disseminated CDC packages reaching to the different clusters... (DEO)

The quote suggests that there was training, but not at the scale or impact level. Cluster-based dissemination does not reach the scale needed to cover national implementation especially in diverse geographies. It suggests that strategic systems planning did not match the scope of reform resulting in inconsistent awareness.

He added these lines too.

Teaching method and many things were like the SLC, just the grading system was changed, and they were not given any teacher's training. (DEO)

The quote indicates that SEE system reform was at surface level, changing the evaluation form only devalued without methodological training. The DEO is aware that the change was incomplete, and in fact many teachers were trained via the old means of evaluation. This indicates a gap between policy impact and professional readiness that signifies a void around educational outcomes of the educational system.

Teachers should be updated with the current issues and teaching methods... However, the government of Nepal is also providing different types of training... because of the issues of teachers' adjustment, there are some problems. (DEO)

Even though orientation and training are scheduled, practical implications, such as teacher readiness, highlight a lack of systemic alignment. The comment by the DEO indicates that even to describe the system as a leadership issue, the training framework is incoherent and has no common implementation plan.

Teacher's training is needed to make themup to date with the present knowledge, to make up to date with ICT. (DEO)

The DEO's comment further illustrate that teacher training is not an issue of, for want of a better term it is absolutely a need to be relied on, especially in a time of rapid digital change. The lack of ICT orientation is hindering not only effective teaching, but it is hindering assessment under a technology as part of learning evaluation framework like SEE.

It's already been three years that SEE is in implementation and until now the teacher's training programme has not come out and teachers are saying whatever they have done they have done with self-study.

CGO stated the followings.

While saying A means outstanding, there is a difference in outstanding in English and in Mathematics. (CGO)

This statement reflects an intrinsic and critical weakness of the GPA system's standardisation there is no explicit or implicit subject differentiation within its standard descriptors. The descriptor of outstanding was applied homogenously, regardless of

differences in the depth of subject complexity, the complexity of assessment, the assessment approach, or styles in English vs Mathematics. The lack of clearly specified differentiated rubrics and training means confusion is created for teachersin how to apply relative grading consistently across subjects, undermining equity, and objectivity.

In addition, CGO also added.

If the subject teacher does not know about this SEE grading system, question arises as how they can be considered orientated in its implementation. (CGO)

This is one of the most honest acknowledgements of failure. It acknowledges openly that the subject teachers had neither the proper orientation necessary to understanding or implementing the grading mechanism. This leads inevitably to varied implementation across schools and districts respectively, resulting in unequal measures of student performance. Highlighting the preliminary phase of the implementation of SEE grading reform DEO further added -

We are still in pre-exercise phase. (DEO)

Three years after calling the national SEE implementation a pre-exercise phase indicates a deep structural deficiency in planning and execution. It also suggests the system is still operating under pilot-like conditions which limits the legitimacy of results and continues to confuse teachers, students, and parents.

4.2.6 Curriculum Design Alignment

A common complaint from teachers was that the current curriculum did not fit well within the grading system of the new SEE. Though the SEE system was massive policy shift, it could not incorporate the major tools which could support he is learning outcomes in the curriculum. As a result, this could not support the competency-based learning. Impotently, the student's perspective on the curriculum design was not found in the study, which suggests that the students realized and experienced the impact but couldn't directly link with the cause of inadequate curriculum design.

One of the teachers mentioned:

Curriculums are also not been designed properly; the marking system is also like the previous system. The only difference is results are published in letter grading. My point is that students are moving to the next level without adequate knowledge content in particular subjects (B2T)

This statement illustrates how the curriculum does not allow for change in the new grading system, potentially leading students to be under-prepared even when they pass their exams.

On one side, it gives a pass certificate to students and on the other side, that certificate does not allow students to go advance for further study, which is the short coming of this system (B3T)

This statement represents an inconsistency in the SEE system. Students may pass yet also may not have the knowledge required to make the transition into higher educations and vocational pathways.

4.2. 7 Pedagogical Differences Between Urban and Rural Schools

One of the major challenges was also observed related to the pedagogical disparities between rural and urban students. One of the objectives of SEE reform was also to foster competency-based learning and reduced the disparities.

However, A student commented on.

In village schools, they only teach from the textbook. In city schools, they also do practicums and use computers. (A2S)

The schoolgirl's observation hints that pedagogical variance and experiential learning did not really exist in rural schools, where rote learning from textbooks is typical. This learning approach did not allow for practicums or the utilization of technology, or critical thinking and application to real-world situations, and creative learning opportunities which all are key aspects of learning as emphasized in educational reforms in recent years. A teacher added on.

In cities, we are more exposed to change and trained teachers, in rural areas most teachers are still confused about grading and still teach the same way. (D4T)

This quote illustrates the possible urban-rural divide with respect to ICT in pedagogy. Urban teachers are moving forward with their pedagogical practice considering the new evaluation and grading policy, but rural teachers have been left behind and have not changed their teaching to adapt to the new practices. It is also important to note that the teacher here notes that in rural schools there is confusion in grading, which reflects the larger understanding of teacher training and support in impacting student learning and experiences.

Similarly, another teacher added.

In the urban private schools, they focus more on presentation, English, and digital teaching. We are still writing on the blackboard with chalk. Even electricity is not regular here. (A2T)

This teacher in a rural school highlights the materials and technological differences when it comes to quality teaching. While urban schools often employ multimedia tools and English instruction as a medium, rural schools are still teaching with the blackboard and chalk. These differences in teaching styles will impact how students engage, learn and they are exposed to their learning environments, and contribute to disparate learning opportunities for rural learners.

Urban schools have everything else. Rural teachers and students are still trying to understand GPA and the marking system-(DEO)

The DEO himself acknowledges the gap between urban and rural implementation in the new grading system, which speaks to the failure of policy to ensure equitable implementation and views implementation as like its equitable distribution for schools. The rural setting continues to work up that hill in effort, want of training, orientation to the system and preparation, and in the process of conforming to pedagogical norms changing slowly while urban schools have standards as the basis of development and access, on an immediate basis.

*We walk to the community, just for project work. In urban schools, they bring people, put it on the internet and PowerPoints. (*C3S)

This quote illustrates even project-based learning is different. Urban schools utilize technology, and external experts while rural students do traditional and localized project work. While both project approaches are valuable, they also produce different learning experiences and outcomes, particularly due to the reliance on and access to resources and support available in teaching and learning.

Teachers in urban areas are watched more, so they use the system better. No one comes to check what we are doing at our school. (A1T)

The lack of a mechanism to monitoring what is happening in rural school, creates a lack of accountability and consistency to the practice of instruction. The urban school, especially with an established budget can establish management and monitoring practices that induce

alignment and criteria with the national curriculum, and the assessment and evaluation reforms. Rural schools effectively operate like the ability of teachers to conform and teach in their own way.

4.2.8 Lack of Transparency in Grading

Transparency is a component of any fair exam system. However, there was dissatisfaction regarding the lack of transparency. One of the students mentioned that they were not allowed to retotal their marks to re-count if the student was not happy.

> *Also, we are not allowed to see our copies for re-totalling if we are not happy with the grades. (C2S)*

This presents a serious barrier to transparency within the SEE system which limits students' capacity to verify or contest their assessment.

> *We just see GPA; we do not know what exact marks we got. Sometimes we feel we deserved more but cannot do anything. (C3S)*

This quote illustrates the murky grading process: students received GPA summaries but had no access to raw marks. The murkiness limits clarity, undermines a feedback loop for students who could receive it, and fuels frustration or apathy on their part. A more transparent approach would provide a breakdown of marks or written feedback.

> *How can I know whether I got 80 or 89? Both are same in GPA but different in effort. (A2S)*

This shows a flaw in how performance distinctions are collapsed by the GPA model. If incremental improvements in scoring aren't clear, for students who are already high achievers they do not have a guideline and their motivation for academic improvement may decrease. Transparency should be considered in both access to scores and detail.

Here are few quotes of teachers who shared their lived experiences which are given below:

> *Evaluation process has not been done in accordance with the value and the norms of grading system. We evaluate student's answers in numbers, and we convert that number in grade. We are supposed to grade each question based on how closely students have answered that question. Now, we are evaluating students exactly in same way as we used to do before. There is no grading in students.*
>
> *evaluation…….. Yes, because of this cocktail, there is confusion over confusion. (BT4)*

Teachers report that scores are still based on numbers, not clear criteria. Mixing GPA and letter grading ("cocktail system") has created confusion among teachers, students, and parents.

It has been difficult to differentiate between GPA, grading and percentage. Still, we have been expressing the results in percentage, which is not correct according to our new

system… There should not be different understanding among the teachers about this system all over the country, however teachers have understood this system quiet.

differently..... Parents come to the school on results day and want to see.

their child's marks sheet. When we show them their results in GPA system like A plus, B, B plus, they ask us to explain them this in percentage. When we tell them in percentage

Teachers describe lack of nationwide clarity and consistent interpretation. Even parents require conversion into percentage, showing lack of transparency in what grades mean. Similarly, and teacher noticed ...

A teacher shared

It is very difficult for teachers to make their students clear on these issues when teachers don't know the issue. (AT3)

This confirms among the schoolteacher themselves lack clarity on GPA vs Letter grade and that show the evidence of lack of transparency among students and parents

When students get marks above 90, then it's been said students got A plus. A plus is only for that subject, there is no letter grading in total GPA, however, teachers have been saying that my student got A plus, B plus and so on. Letter grading is for subject, it is not for overall GPA and CGPA, which I believe many teachers haven't understood clearly. (AT2)

This system came in force from the government of Nepal without enough preparation and I doubt while clarifying the meaning of literacy, our experts were kept in dark. (DT4)

This shows the same lack of transparency and communication about how grading connects to broader policy goals and educational outcomes.

Furthermore, a government official said as

In the issue of evaluation, what is their confusion is; at very first grading is calculated in percentage and then it changes to GPA and from GPA, they calculate in full hundred percent… There is two grading, one in GPA and another is letter grading; there are many things been merged from the beginning to the end. (DEO)

This conveys confusion and irregularity in how grades were evaluated and reported it is evidence of a lack of transparency in grading for teachers, students, and parents alike.This quote demonstrates that the grading system required transparency and follow- through. Teachers could not clearly clarify grades, and no sufficient system or regulation was in place.

4.2.8.1 Marginalisation of Optional Subjects in the SEE System

*The work has been done to create confusion. Let's say, teachers should be able to see the students in grade, it's not there. There are a lot of confusions; it is like placing a flower in flowerpot and left behind. There is lacking support, take care and preparation as needed. When this system was started, the spirit was not only to convert numbers into grade; it used to require further work, which has almost not been done yet. (*CGO)

The introduction of the SEE system has raised questions about whether the inclusion of optional subjects may contribute to marginalisation in the educational landscape. Both students and teachers agree that there is no meaningful recognition of optional subjects for their contribution to the overall GPA. Althoughoptional subjects are recognised as a part of the curriculum, their limited contribution to overall academic achievement under the SEE grading system has created frustration and disappointment among both teachers and students. Moreover, it is also recognised that it ranks lower as a measure of achievement under the SEE system.

Students said so:

*May be all other have practical exams but maths does not have so is it difficult to pass?" One teacher also noted. (*C4B)

Students also think not having any practical exams in math shows that it is not fair for to score better marks in Maths.

In this system, in secondary level, I have an imposed number of subjects according to the national curriculum, which is 8 subjects which need to be passed. Among those eight subjects, two are optional subjects; including the one which I teach. The SEE system hasn't considered those as subjects. Whether you get a score in those subjects or not; it doesn't make any difference. It has discriminated against those subjects (C5T).

Another teacher added

Similarly, have agreed to the point about the working hard for tendency has decreased and the emphasised from the student's motivation, devotion and dedication has gone down a lot specially for optional subject even more. (DT3)

Similarly, teacher DT3 has agreed that the tendency to work hard has decreased and the emphasis on the student's motivation, devotion, and dedication has gone down a lot, especially for optional subjects even more.

This statement reflects the educator's exasperation at considering optional subjects as trivial educational elements. The SEE system mandates that students take optional subject courses. Unfortunately, when student scores are totalled, those scores are used to compute the overall average; since optional subjects are not included in the overall GPA, they receive considerably less weight than core subjects. Consequently, the GPA cannot substantially benefit from successful progress in optional subjects relative to core subjects.

Decreased engagement in optional subjects demotivates students to engage successfully. Teachers feel the SEE system de-constructs holistic education and presupposes students are getting a poor academic mark if for the most part they are getting a decent mark in core subjects while rendering optional subjects as entirely irrelevant even if optional subjects might be aligning with student passions or interests or future career aspirations such as arts education or vocational program studies or speciality training programs.

This statement makes clear that students must take optional subjects; however, student scores from optional subjects do not factor into an overall GPA; therefore, those scores, even more than in weighted subjects, are not factored into GPA average scores. The fact that scores ultimately do not even raise concern among students leads to the devaluation of optional subjects in students' perceptions of the SEE system.

The comments of the teacher indicate that this is an issue related to one dimension of systemic practice in the SEE curriculum, as when administrators and leaders consider only a narrow focus on core subject areas, the risk is diminished value for optional subjects - hence limiting knowledge and learning of content from other areas and devaluingthe practice of teachers who provide learning through this curriculum. The marginalisation of optional subjects in the SEE therefore poses the risk of missed opportunities to provide a well-rounded education that extends students' skills and interests in other subject areas and supports more than one talent or ability.

Similarly, a government official's view is

*Students are not allowed to study science and other technical subjects without securing C plus. (*DEO)

This grading constraint indirectly lessens the value of optional subjects, as students' progress depends only on "core" subjects (like Science and Math), not the optional ones, reinforcing their marginal status in the SEE framework.

He highlights that optional and less-taught subjects (like Sanskrit, Optional Math, etc.) lack

If there are 52 subjects in class 10, what is outstanding means in Sanskrit should also been written. But that is not written. And subject teacher doesn't know about this and how can we say, they are orientated. (CGO)

strong standards or "outstanding" criteria. This omission leads to their marginalisation; teachers and students are left without guidance on how these subjects are evaluated. Now, I have explored and recorded the findings on grading and results

4.2.8.2 Grading and Results

Student and teacher feedback consistently showed that the questions on the SEE exams were difficult and, at times, very unexpected. Many students noted that the questions were not what they expected, and that this variable contributed to their lower grades and frustration.

My experience was not good, because unexpected questions were asked. I struggled to understand the question. I found it difficult (D3S).

Again, this establishes students' hindrance in not being prepared for the type of inquiries that informed their preparation.

This illustrates the disconnect between the curriculum and the exam questions, which resulted in students not performing.

The exam questions often don't align with what we teach, and this leads to confusion and dissatisfaction among students (A6T).

In addition, Government officials commented as:

*In evaluation itself, it doesn't have any problems, but it depends on the person who implements. (*DEO)

Here, the DEO highlights that the reliability of grading and evaluation relies on execution rather than strategy of policy design. This statement emphasizes how systemic errors like untrained teachers or unreliable practices challenge the trustworthiness of results, even if the grading structure itself is reliable.

CGO argues that:

Only converting number into letter grade has no meaning. (CGO)

The SEE grading reform in Nepal has been executed seemingly merely turning marks into grades without absorbed educational or systemic change. This quote depicts the critique that marking, when detached from genuine reflection, learning, or skill development, becomes a representational rather than fundamental reform.

However, I have limited knowledge about student motivation; through this study, I have explored it.

Effects of the Grading System on Student Motivation

This insight speaks to how the new grading system has shifted students' focus away from striving to achieve and toward seeking only the minimum pass mark.

…. Students *used to study a lot more before in SLC than they do currently, and many of them seem to feel that there is no need to study as hard and that they will receive the same grades as before……. (*C4S)

This change in perspective, noted by both teachers and students, indicates that the more relaxed expectations of SEE are resulting in a reduction in academic effort.

The letter grading has normalized passiveness in students. They think they can go for further education simply by getting D plus (A1T).

Similarly, the most common critique of the SEE system is its effects on students' motivation. Teachers mentioned that the leniency of the grading system has made students apathetic because they discovered they could pass with little effort.

The perceived ease of passing has made students less ambitious, as they know they only need to achieve the minimum number of requirements to get through.

Before SEE grading, I think students used to work hard to not get an F. Now though, even if they received an E grade, they could move forward, and it makes students lose their desire about the subjects (A2T).

In similar way, government officials highlighted

Students who are little bit weaker or medium level student they have got perception that they won't fail. (DEO)

DEO's echo this difficulty from the bottom line stating that the new grading system has triggered many of the average and weaker students to have less of a fear of failing. In theory, declining the fear of failure would also reduce anxiety with exams. However, reducing anxiety related to exams does not compare to improving the motivation for students to continue studying consistently since they will be able to pass regardless of their effort.

The CGO level identifies an unintended consequence of the SEE grading system: the

Students, parents and teachers, most of them' understanding is that student will pass without studying. (CGO)

awareness of "guaranteed passing" fosters a culture of satisfaction among students, reducing motivation to study and, in turn, creating a comfort zone that discourages hard work. Now I have noted findings about the grade boundary system

Grade Boundary System

The grading boundary system has also been criticised as far too wide; it may be that a slight change in performance that falls within the boundary is the difference between grades. The system created a sense of fairness, especially for those students capable of high achievement.

Competitors feel left behind because of this grading system, because the small difference in marks makes a significant impact on grading (C2S).

This quote addresses the perceived difficulty of accounting for students who perform similarly (but differently) when the grade interval is so wide.

The gap between grades is big, and it is not helpful in identifying a student's exact ability. There is a fear that many students will fall in the same grade, which is not fair (A4T).

Teachers remarked that the widely spaced grades (with regard to intervals) can create situations where very different ability students can end up with the same mark, which undermines assessment quality and student motivation.

There were no quotes from Deo; however, CGO has mentioned an experience about it

In this grading system, the important thing which we couldn't do is; in general, it has been set that. If your results are outstanding , that means your grade is A and However, it has been defined that what is the outstanding of math, what is the outstanding of English, what is the outstanding of social education. How teachers' preparation can be enough until knowingthis. How the message will be delivered to the students(CEO)

The CGO identifies that there are no defined grade level boundaries or subject specific values for grades given in the SEE of Nepal; while general labels exist (A or A+) the Government did not create a description as to what those labels represent at the subject level. The lack of defined grade level boundaries is causing confusion with both teachers and students, also creating inconsistency in evaluations and poor alignment between assessments of student performance and the actual learning outcomes of the students.

4.3 Behind the Grades: Student and teachers Complaints and Critiques

The statement suggests that while the SEE system lowers stress, it also lowers students' enthusiasm for performance excellence which may foster complacency in some students who do not feel they have worked hard for their education.

> *I felt confused because I thought I did well, but I did not get a very good grade, and there is no way to see what happened* (C4S).

This quote highlights the issue of transparency in the grading process, that is, students do not have a clear picture of how their results were reached and thus do not have opportunities to improve because they cannot learn from their mistakes.

One student noted that the SEE was supposed to reduce rates of failure, but it does not always capture actual learning:

> *It's not hard to pass, but that doesn't mean we're learning much. The exams seem like a kind of formality, but not so much measure what we know* (D2S).

This comment seemed to suggest that the SEE system may prioritize rates of passing versus actual learning, leaving a subset of students feeling that the evaluation lacks some substantive degree.

In another case, a student expressed worry about the expectation to achieve top marks with the SEE process, despite the leniency or perceived leniency of the system:

> *The system is supposed to be easier, but the pressure to get a high GPA is still there. If you don't people will think you haven't done well* (C1S).

This appears to illustrate a tension between the leniency of the SEE process versus the high expectations applied to learners to receive the highest marks possible, which, ultimately,

> *I put in a lot of work for months, and my grades didn't reflect that. It felt like my hard work was a waste* (A5S).

may threaten learners' stress and satisfaction. Another student described how their marks didn't represent the preparation effort, saying:

The disappointment shows where students feel disconnected from effort to GPA as a whole and create demotivation.

Most students in private schools seemed to have a good understanding of the grading system and it was more articulate than public school.

One student explained, *if students get marks from 90-70, it is said A plus. From 80-90 is compared as A grade. From 70-80 B plus, from 60-70 B. Different grade is given per difference of 7.* (C1S)

This student showed a clear understanding of the grading breakdowns, and what was expected from students in each grade.

Another student reiterated the understanding when she remarked, and all grades are on a 7% interval (C2S)

The students in private schools tended to show this same understanding of the grading system, which suggests that private schools effectively communicated and educated their students of the grading system.

In contrast, most boys in public schools did not even know about the grading system, with only a few girls having knowledge of the grading system. One boy expressed, no, we don't know (B2S).

This language described a big gap in their understanding, and this gap would likely have an impact on their academic planning, and academic performance.

One girl from a public school had some understanding, but even admitted her knowledge was limited, saying, little bit, for example if you get 50-60 percent that comes under C grade. (B2S)

This left knowledge gap was highlighted as an area of improvement where public schools need to share and inform students about the grading system and need to bring everyone up to the same level of information.

The SEE system is generally viewed positively, due to the lower reported failures, more opportunity, less stress, and improved input from teachers. There are still challenges, for example, question difficulty, and that students continue to mis-understand the grading

system; these are areas that still need improving in the overall roll-out and communication of the SEE system.

Similarly, Teachers also had mixed emotions regarding the SEE system, including with the grading system and the attitudes towards student learning that it engenders. They reported that even if students more comfortably pass, at that grade level the system does not

> *A lot of confusion regarding how GPA is calculated, makes it difficult to explain to students and parents* (B8T).

necessarily equate to a better level of knowledge and academic progress.

This teacher discusses the ongoing confusion around the grading system, making it difficult for teachers to guide students and parents when thinking about a student's academic performance.

Several teachers commented on concerns about the shallow nature of the evaluation.

> *At least the students are passing, but the system doesn't necessarily change the amount they know. It feels like more of a process than an actual evaluation*. (C4T).

This quote supports a widely voiced critique of the SEE-system; while it generally allowed students to transition to a passing mark with more ease than before, it doesn't necessarily provide any assurance that they are learning or understanding the material in a meaningful way.

A teacher articulated similar perspectives as she indicated how the students' grades were not necessarily linked to the students' actual performance. As she said, it appears great on paper, but when we looked at their content knowledge sometimes it was obvious that they were struggling with basic concepts. This raises the important concern that many students could be misled by the grading system as is usually supports students with the impression they are performing at a higher level than they demonstrate understanding of the subject.

These are the matching quotes:

> *It appears great on paper, but when we looked at their content knowledge sometimes it was obvious that they were struggling with basic concepts. (BT4)*

In addition, one more teacher added:

Students get more marks because there is twenty-five practical marks in six subjects however, they scoreless in theoretical parts, which means in practical parts it seems they are doing well but at the same time they haven't been able to express those learning in theoretical subjects. (BT2)

Similarly, another teacher said.

In student's evaluation, there is a major problem that the government has not been able to go in equivalent system of the practical marks. Even academically very poor students get 25 out of 25 marks in practical marks which is not fair for the students who is 10 times better than the poor students. (CT5)

Private school teachers expressed their own discontent about the unintentional

Students know that they can pass exams without hard work, so they choose easy and comfortable path. *(DT4)*

consequences that the SEE system raises the bar, as exemplified in the following: The SEE system allowed them (students) to pass with a lower level of effort but it also allows them to put less effort in as they know they can pass without much work.

Teachers discovered a correspondingly balanced perspective. They welcomed the higher pass rates and reduced pressure on students, but raised concerns about unclear grading criteria, bias toward optional subjects, and declining student motivation.

Here are examples of what teachers said about this topic. Similarly, another teacher explained.

After the implementationof this new system, student's habit to do hard work has declined. They are sure that they will pass the exam anyway, so they have been less active. *(BT5)*

Students have got the mindset that without doing hard work they can obtain GPA above.

1.6 and they are not going to fail. It has developed a tradition within students not to do in-depth study in any subjects. (AT2)

The one who has obtained 99 marks think that if his grade is going to be same as the one who has got 90 marks, he doesn't see the point of doing hard work. The level of hard work has fallen of good students. (CT5)

Moreover, most of the interviewed teachers had many problems in the development of the curriculum for the SEE. The most common problem cited by teachersfrom both public and private schools was the lack of training for teachers. In addition, other issues included preparation, communication between teachers, the exclusion of private schools by the government, and lack of materials and people power.

4.8.2.3.1 Lack of teachers' training

An additional issue is the teacher's lack of training on effective use of the SEE system. Teachers in both the private and public sectors expressed similar frustrations in their surveys, indicating that the government does not help them enough to make it more effective in teaching and assessing their students.

Neither before nor after the implementation of this system have, we received training about this system. There are some educational materials like articles and news published in newspapers, but formal training has not been provided (A1T).

All the teachers said they were unsupported by any formal training, especially the private school teachers and were left alone to implement the new changes.

We haven't received any training from concerned stakeholders in the education sector. We have taken this system in operation by consulting friends and doing self-study (A6T).

This quote points out the missing institutional support given to teachers which inhibited their capacity to teach effectively on the new program.

The lack of teacher education was determined to be a large salient issue. One public school teacher stated, one teacher explained,

For the students who are not that good in study they can do much better by choosing technical line where they can learn things by taking training and developing his skills.(A2T)

Another teacher emphasised,

it has ended the situation not to go for further study only because of getting fail in the exams. In any subjects whatsoever is the performance of the students according to his capacity it has opened the ways and doors for students (A1T).

We studied in textbooks about the letter grading system; we teachers learnt from different sources about the letter grading system.

As a teacher, neither before nor after the implementation of this system,

we have got training about this system. There are some educational materials like articles and news published in newspapers related to this and some from our own experiences. I am not sure, it might have been given to the limited number of teachers who are in acting roles like head teachers, but I don't think it was given to general teachers. In my case, I was deprived from this. (A1T).

This emphasizes the reliance on self-study due to the lack of formal training. A schoolteacher articulated a comparable sentiment, stating,

We haven't been given any training. Whatever we have learnt, it's all from self-study. And another thing is, when there are any changes in the education system, it's very hard for us to be updated on those issues because we don't get messages. (D2T).

This underscores the widespread feeling of being left unsupported and uninformed about the new system.

Furthermore, there were criticisms about the lack of proper planning and interaction between teachers.

Another teacher expressed, Education experts and the consultant didn't do hard work while developing the curriculum. I think this system came in force without enough preparation and homework. (D4T).

This sentiment was echoed by others who felt that the curriculum was hastily implemented without thorough planning.

The abandonment of private schools by the government was another repeating theme. One private school teacher commented,

….the government doesn't want to invest in teachers. Since we are the private school teachers, the government has done nothing for us…Having said that it doesn't mean that our performance is poor compared to the teacher at government schools; we are working aggressively and performing well…(D4T)

This displays the frustration felt by private school teachers who believe overlooked by government policies and support systems.

In terms of resources and manpower, a public-school teacher noted, because of this, even though this evaluation system is a good system, it has been very difficult to implement in full flagged in Nepal. There is a problem on effective implementation because of the lack of resources, manpower, and the lack of understanding as well. (A1T). This reveals that the implementation challenges are not only due to the system itself but also due to infrastructural deficiencies.

This critique highlights a cultural disconnect, as well as an absence of contextualization in the curriculum design.

The insights draw attention to some of the many issues in the development of the SEE curriculum and reinforce the need for proper teacher training, teacher preparation, teacher communication, equitable government support, resources and another curriculum that is not simply a direct copy of another Western model and is based on the context (i.e., cultural context).

4.8.2.3.2 Lack of Support and Preparation

Several teachers from both private and public schools reported feeling inadequately prepared during the curriculum's development. The teachers are clearly indicating they received little preparation before the implementation of the new system, a view also held by a Central Government Officer (CGO). The teachers expressed that little, if any, groundwork was established to promote teacher stability, organisation, and knowledge of the new curriculum; hence, the teachers felt confused and inefficient in enacting a new system, with very little time to mentally prepare or basic knowledge of its implications for teaching and learning.

One teacher pointed out,

Education experts and the consultant didn't do hard work while developing the curriculum. I think this system came in force without enough preparation and homework. (D4T).

This remark underscores the lack of thorough planning and research before rolling out the new curriculum.

Another teacher added,

I would like to add to this, at first, they didn't add practical to D plus, they said students should get D plus only in theoretical parts. But, later, the government changed its mind and said practical can be added. You can get an idea from this example, how government is clear about its policies. The letter grading system came into practice without enough preparation and research. (A1T).

This changes mid-implementation highlights the government's unclear policy directions and the need for better planning and the difficulties in preparing students for the assessments.

4.8.2.3.3 Government Ignoring Private Schools

Teachers at private schools have always said that the government is either unaware of them or neglects them. They often feel unsupported and under-resourced as compared to teachers in public schools, which leads to discontentment. Frequently, private school teachers feel that the government does not recognise or support their work with students in private schools.

One teacher at a private school stated their frustrations with the government's lack of support for teachers in private schools:

> *The government doesn't want to invest in teachers. Since we are the private school teachers, the government has done nothing for us. Having said that, it does not mean that our performance is poor than the teachers at government school, we are working aggressively and performing well* (D4T).

This teacher's quote shows a level of frustration that private school teachers work so hard yet receive no support from the government.

Another teacher expressed this idea, and in fact shared how private school teachers have even been omitted from important advisories and training programs developed for public school teachers,

> *We have not been given any training around this...Whatever we have learned, it's all from self-study. And another thing is, when there are any changes in the education system, it's very hard for us to be updated on those issues because we don't get the message (D2T).*

This emphasises that when communication is non-existent between government and private schools, teachers in private schools are not informed about educational reforms, widening the gap between public and private schools.

Further, another private school teacher remarked on the unfair advantage, with the government not providing any materials or financial help to private schools:

> *The government doesn't provide any materials or resources to private schools. Even though we are educating a large portion of students, we are completely left out when it comes to government assistance (C5T).*

This quote represents the broader question of inequity in resource distribution that leads to major disparity in the public education experience compared to the private education experience.

The idea or feeling of being left behind comes into play when we think about teacher evaluation and teacher appreciation:

Even though we are working hard, we are not given the same recognition or support as public-school teachers. It feels like we are being overlooked just because we are in the private sector (D6T).

This demonstrates the level of disengagement and disenchantment of private school teachers. Through no fault of their own, teachers at private schools feel that their contributions and accomplishments are irrelevant because the government shows no interest in private education.

Government disregard for private school teachers leads to extreme disparities in quality and resources between private and public schools. Consolidated into one stronger system, public school teachers can benefit from government assistance with training, resources, and learning experiences. In contrast, private school teachers do not receive the same educational support, leading to inequity in the experiences available to teachers and students.

4.8.2.3.4 Insufficient Resources and Manpower

Insufficient resources and manpower were another very relevant point raised in their discussions by teachers from public schools and supported by the CGO.

One teacher noted, because of this, even though this evaluation system is a good system, it has been very difficult to implement in full-fledged in Nepal. There is a problem of effective implementation, because of the lack of resources, and manpower, and the lack of understanding as well (A1T).

The CGO also mentioned this problem, stating that the preparation and institutionalisation (institutionalisation refers to a process of embedding the SEE system firmly and systematically into the educational framework, so it becomes a fully functioning and integrated part of how education is administered, taught and assessed at all levels) have not been done at the same level. This is one of the weakest areas. Regarding institutionalisation, even the subject teacher should be aware of the students, and that has not been done. Workforce needs to develop, and resources need to develop. Planning and preparation have not been done for the implementation. This is a very weak area.

4.3 The implications of Federalisation Presented by SEE

The government of Nepal restructured the country's governance system in 2015 by enshrining federalisation in the Constitution of Nepal. The power system and authority were centralised before the announcement of federalisation, and now they have been decentralised, with an equal effect across all sectors, including education. The power transmission under the Ministry of Education has now moved to the provincial and local levels to better meet the needs of local communities. Under this new regime, the responsibility for the Secondary Education Examination (SEE) has now been handed over to the provinces. Therefore, the province is responsible for the organisation and administration of the examination, the marking of the examination, and the provision of the necessary resources.

Federalisation also had huge implications in many areas. To the education sector, it has four major interrelated issues of:

(1) The quality of education: The basic understood principle of federalisation is that it empowers local government to improve the quality of education; however, the response from the concerned stakeholders of this study suggests mixed outcomes where some of the provinces have aligned their curriculum and the assessment criteria based on their local community needs. It shows that some provinces have gone beyond the national framework. This inconsistency raises questions about the core goal of the SEE to provide a national standard for secondary education outcomes.

(2) The equitable distribution of resources: Another fundamental principle of federalisation is the equitable distribution of the available resources. However, the findings suggest a disparity in resource allocation. Urban schools are better equipped than rural schools, and the facilities provided to students in urban and rural areas are unequal. Rather than filling the gaps in inequalities, federalisation has not been able to do so.

(3) The consistency in management of SEE: The management of SEE under the federal system is the major change, where such processes, preparation of examination, monitoring, and evaluation used to be managed centrally. The shift from central management to province-level management provided an opportunity to the local levels; however, lack of robust

(4) coordination mechanism between federal and province level has made further complications affecting the credibility and reliability of the SEE exam system.

(5) Globalisation and the adaptation of Western educational systems: Globalisation has brought different ideas together. Particularly under the SEE grading assessment system, the focus is on continuous assessment and a competency-based education model. However, my study has revealed that, despite the SEE's intent to encourage practical and analytical learning, it has not yet achieved that. It aspires to achieve a global education system under federalisation; however, it is struggling with limited resources, capacity, and effective implementation.

(6) Uniformity of SEE Organisation and Quality Control

The incongruity created by the decentralisation of SEE was a common point voiced by teachers and officials regarding the organisation, administration, and marking of SEE examinations across Nepal's seven provinces.

These are the list of quotes where teachers have shared their own experiences as follows:

*This system was introduced without any sort of teacher-training which is the greatest fault of the government and teacher's state. Possibly one or two percent of teachers may have had training rest of teachers have tried to get the system interpreted by what they hear or have seen. (*CT3)

The fact that there are so many discrete interpretations of the new grading policy by teachers demonstrates the absence of a clear directive on the grading system and adequate support for implementation provided by the Ministry of Education. Teachers were unsure as to how to best use and implement the new grading policy due to this ambiguity; with inconsistencies being experienced in terms of school-by-school subject specific grading, which only added to the inconsistency between schools.

MATHEMATICS and in other subjects Coursework, it is certainly under other meanings what people got in our way, they handed them in these results, and some subjects (CT7)

It may also mean rivalry including provinces and hence educational quality would be improved. (AT2)

Teachers have been aware of the possibilities that might come to pass if to the SEE was handed over provincial management. It might add to competition that would lead to increased educational quality. With the SEE now managed by provinces, it can create competition between provinces that can lead to improvement to educational quality. (BT6) Federation aims to hand overpowers to local level, but whether local level has still the power to perform these duties efficiently is in doubt.

Competition may lead to responsibility and improvement in efficiency, but the respondents were fearful lest wear and tear of unequal means of performing and having limited capacity amongst provinces lead to defects in educational quality. The federal structure leads to

It has been rather difficult to differentiate in GPA. grading though and percentage whilst we have been giving our results in proportions which do not occur to our new system of grading. (CT5)

… .....There should be no different understanding of the markers of the teaching systemas regards this point of view all over the country, however teacher have taken the system up rather differently, this is one of the most important things… (CT6)

consideration of outside practices and conforming to the Education of developed Western countries, as the system of federalisation that obtains in all countries complies with systems of the West in assessment and the governance of education.

Now the system of provincialisation meted out by Nepal leads to the same series of education and continual assessment, but the weak process of realisation locally necessitates adapting the people's thought processes appropriately so that they will not blindly follow in their refusal. Resource Equity and Exam Comparability

Participants expressed concern that decentralisation may exacerbate inequalitiesbetween urban and rural provinces in terms of financing, teacher availability, and the comparability of examinations.

Major problem for students in far west provinces is competing with others if exam is left to province to plan. (AT6)

This disparity features developing regional inequalities, where students in less developed areas face additional encounters due to the lack of uniform examination standards and organization.

Concerns are expressed about different criteria for question papers in provinces which can compromise the consistency and reliability of SEE results. (DT3)

This teacher was suggesting hybrid methods which allow for local self-government and local management but think the national approach is important:

A central exam in conjunction with local or provincial responsibility may be better, like possibilities in India where one central exam exists along with local tests. (DT2).

These comments illustrate the necessity for a national level of regulation to ensure fairness and comparability of examinations but still preserving the beneficial aspects of local management.

Each province is responsible for the setting of the questions. There are also leaks of questions or one province gets affected and the other provinces don't care. (DT3)

We have seven provinces and nothing that guarantees that they all have the same quality. I mean one province is too easy and one province too hard for the respective examination. (C1T)

While teachers expressed concerns about differences in examination standards across authorities, government officials emphasized the executive doubt that decentralisation has presented into the direction of SEE activities.

These comments indicate growing differences in the administration of examinations and in level of assessment, whilst the SEE is not controlled centrally in order that fairness and similarity shine through across the country. In the absence of this uniform moderation and

We are waiting to see how to tie in local government with local government. There is SEE in between. (DEO)

The above quote coordination, the decentralisation is likely to result in the assessment system being torn apart and in a loss of the overall national standards involved.

In evaluating the inconsistency and dilution of the grading system between various subject areas, teachers have indicated that government officials have stated that such inconsistency is the result of broader issues associated with preparation, documentation, and teacher capacity.

The preparation, documentation, capacity building at different levels, assistance and training, these aspects are much weaker in this system. (CGO)

Thus, it follows that federalisation has sharpened the discrepancies that existed previously in grading and assessment standards. The educational authorities, not having prepared teachers and having failed to give them directions and instructions through training, have led to different practices amongst themselves and different interpretations of the standards of assessment, i.e., confusion and inequity between schools.

CGO again critiques SEE's quality using his own metaphor.

The work has been done to create confusion. Let's say teachers should be able to see the students in grade, it's not there. There are a lot of confusion; it is like placing flowerpot and left behind without taking care of it. There is a lack of support, take care and preparation as needed. When this system of grading was put in place it was meant to be not converting numbers to grades; it was to involve additional work, which has been mostly disregarded.(CGO)

This statement shows the inconsistency of the course of action in implementing it and it has caused confusion and created no support for the teachers.

4.3.6 Concerns about Long-Term Effect of Quality and Pathways for Students

This theme emerged among all stakeholders involved in this study. Student comments on

No, in fact I wanted to study management, but I am studying education now (A6S).

The quote is revealing of a strong be afraid that the SEE grading system will limit entry to anticipated academic programs in the future. While scholars are technically "passing" but because of grade restrictions, cannot pursue the stream they prefer, it illustrates that "passing without failing" does not mean meaningful academic opportunities exist for students; thus, there is a clear disconnect between the outcomes of valuations and academic pathways obtainable to students.

*I don't like grading system. Because, it has developed false mindset to the students that anyone can pass exam even with less effort. (*A1S)

The above quote stresses the ways in which the current grading system could affect student motivation over time and ultimately, the continuing quality of learning. The certainty that everybody can easily pass and accept good grades establishes a deficiency of seriousness in academics, which has consequences for future academic planning and the capability to contest for jobs in the future.

Students were articulating frustration with the absence of clarity surrounding grades and the potential effect on future academic options, while teachers were more disturbed with the fact that the grading system could have an undesirable effect on the overall quality of education and the level of introductory knowledge that would be influenced by graduating students.

Main disadvantage of this system is student's devotion, discipline and the motivation towards the education has constantly decreasing which is not a good sign. I have a fear that instead of uplifting our education system, this new system will take our education system in wrong direction. (DT4)

In this quote, the author reveals what types of effects the current grading systems might have on the motivation of students at school and ultimately on the quality of their long-term education. The indication that anyone can pass and get good grades creates a serious issue with taking school seriously; it affects the preparation students will need to compete for jobs later in life.

One brilliant student was unable to sit in the exam due to illness on exam day, which resulted in a lower grade. Since he got fewer grades, now he is not eligible to choose science subjects. However, in previous systemwhether you get 50 or 85 percent, you were free to choose the subject of your interest. (DT3)

This example demonstrates how the rigid grading ratios of SEE may limit prospects for students based on certain constraints. Although SEE is general in many ways, the system can be unjust to students who are impacted by small issues when trying to pass through the system; this is a contradiction to fairness and opportunity.

In the same way, government officials also endorsed the opinions of teachers in relation to the fact that decentralised control could work against the coherence and quality in education if there is no proper invigilation and management.

Federalising SEE may lead to competition showing up in quality of examinations at provincial level but depends on the problematics of exposing the possible changes in quality if this is not properly controlled…. the obvious pathway for students is important so that the SEE gives a meaningful end point examination (CGO).

These comments illustrate the uncertainty that existsabout whether the SEE will maintain its national importance by having non-coherent pathways related to grades, promotion and qualifications exist across the provinces.

In summary, it is obvious that the federalisation has changed the nature of the management of the SEE by delegating responsibility to both provincial governments and local organisations. The consequence of this might result in greater regional autonomy, if not regulation, and greater competition for educational quality, but it reveals inequities in the preparation of teachers, allocation of resources, the grading of tests, and the comparability of examinations. The absence of controlling or coordinating techniques may well produce different standards of education across the country. It is clear from the picture of the participants that although federalisation offers great potential for innovation and accountability, its successful implementation will depend on effective central and controlling mechanisms, equitable resource distribution, and appropriate adjustments of global educational models to local contexts.

4.3.7 Increased Competition and Education Quality

One positive aspect of federalisation, as noted by several participants, is the potential for increased competition among provinces. Students, teachers, and administrators believe that local management of the SEE could enhance accountability and drive improvements in education quality.

Even one mark changes the grade, and which is challenging for the competitor

With the SEE exam now managed by provinces, it can increase competition among provinces, potentially enhancing education quality (BT6).

This quote reflects teachers' optimism that provincial oversight could lead to better educational outcomes, as provinces would be motivated to outperform one another.

A school repeated this sentiment, indicating that federalization if properly succeeded could lead to higher standards in education. This quote expresses the positions of ……stating that if properly carried out, federalization can help increase education quality through raising the quality of education standards …. (AT2).

Similarly, another teacher commented as:

This shows teachers' optimism that decentralisation is an effective method to improve educational quality, create provincial accountability, and foster province-vs-province competitive learningenvironments. In addition, a participant noted that federalisation can be positive when managed correctly, providing opportunities for improved quality across all levels of education.

These comments showed the potential and uncertainty of federalisation's impact on local

Federalization focus to hand over rights to local levels, but the capability of locals to manage these obligations successfully is still in question. In addition, it could increase rivalry including provinces and potentially improve education quality (AT2).

authorities' influence on educational performance more broadly.

Federalising SEE may lead to competition showing up in quality of examinations at provincial level but depends on the problematics of exposing the possible changes in quality if this is not properly controlled. (DEO)

This shows the government officials' acceptance of competition; however, if the impact of federalisation is not properly regulated, it can be very challenging.

4.5.3 Barriers to resource allocation/ equity and exam comparability

There is also the possibility that some of the positive opportunities were blurred by concerns raised by many study participants about resource inequality and the provinces' capacity to provide a more effective SEE system. These inequities could result in poor examination quality and differences in student performance across provinces, especially between less-resourced districts and even more remote districts.

A major challenge for students in far western regions is competing with others if the exam is managed solely at the provincial level (AT6).

The comment emphasizes the kind of regional inequities that could open-up through federalization, also inequities for students living in more remote locales as compared to those living in wealthier urban provinces. Teachers from private schools also had mixed feelings about the possibilities of federalization. One teacher pointed out, the instrumental and various dimensions of question paper quality could vary across provinces which jeopardized the overall standardization and reliability of SEE outcomes.

There are concerns about variations in question paper quality across provinces, which could affect the consistency and reliability of SEE results (DT3).

This also illustrates the risk of provinces producing exams unevenly, which could jeopardise the equity of the SEE system.

One of the other participating teachers from the private school sector also alluded to a hybrid model in which central-level exams can include provincial-level elements, as in India.

A central-level exam alongside local or provincial responsibilities might be a better option, aligning with systems like India's, where one central exam exists alongside local exams (DT2).

This suggestion reflects the need for balance in exam administration to ensure both national standards and local flexibility.

4.5.5 Concerns About Educational Quality

The CGO also discussed worries over how federalisation could impact the quality overall, and noted that, while competition between provinces could work in our favour, the CGO voiced their concern that ……

If anything were to change in terms of decentralized control over an exam, that there could be changes to what the exam meant either for the student or teachers, that led to lower overall standards (CGO)

This highlights the fears of what federalization might would mean if it were controlled;

Federalizing SEE's may create some competition at the provincial level, but there are issues that there could be changes in quality if these exams are not controlled properly (CGO).

that effects would mean changes to quality educational practices especially in the provinces that have lesser resources.

The CGO also spoke to the importance of a clear pathway for students after grade 7, to promote that SEE serves a meaningful end-level exam.

The clear pathway for students is important to ensure that SEE provides a meaningful end level exam (CGO).

Ultimately, without a pathway, the SEE will become no different than the other contenders for defining education students beyond grade 7, has a pathway as well; especially if the provincials introduce variations in interpretation and administration of the exam.

4.5.4 SEE's Connections to International Education Trends, Globalization, and critiques

A students commented on GPA system.

GPA system is like foreign country (but we do not do the support structure or any feedback practice. (C1S)

Similarly, a teacher added.

This system was built to follow international trends and getting international money but there is no concept or infrastructure for it, so it's only window dressing. (A5T)

This quote critiques SEE for its emphasis on form over content - leading one to even say SEE's focus on aligning with international trends is largely symbolic not substantive. If there is no ground reform (training, resources, technology) there will be no change.

One teacher also emphasises how federalization and people in power do the favouritism over competencies of the human resources. It also highlights how recruitment is done in Nepal.

In our municipality the education officer is not from an education background how can he help us with planning for SEE? (A2T)

This shows a misallocation of expertise at the local levels. Assigning authority to staff who do not have an unchallengeable education degree means we have forfeited governing capacity. This quotation underscores the necessity of capacity building in decentralised educational units.

Policies are on paper, not practice. Local governments do not even do any monitoring to see how grading in schools was done. (B4T)

This quotation is a good case of implementation fatigue. There are policies, but because training or monitoring does not happen, accountability is also absent for local implementation of papers. No solid administration/decentralization of policy equals inertia.

We were told run SEE according to new model, but no one came to orient us. In fact, no orientation at all organized by municipality. (B6T)

This tells us there is complete absence of implementation support at the local level. The lack of orientation is also indicative of top-down policy orienting- undermining engagement and delivery. The bottom-up training of an issue at local a level is central.

Similarly, the CGO has opened about Local government about its accountability.

Local governments are supposed to be accountable for SEE but have not training and have no staff trained. The policy comes from central government, but local government supposed to implement policy without support. (CGO)

Now, as topic suggests, next section explains the view of SEE because of globalisation.

4.5.4.1 SEE is result of globalization.

Some participants across the focus groups and interviews noted that the establishment of SEE in Nepal is the result of globalization in the education system. They mentioned that the aspiration is to elevate the educational parameters of Nepal to align with international standards because of SEE. As one respondent said,

at this present context of globalization, it's acceptable to adopt this system to elevate our education system to an international level. (DT2)

However, some expressed concern whether they were adequately prepared and about whether this system aligns with the needs of Nepal.

A participant pointed out,

*we have just copied everything without seeing our ground reality. I can only say it would be great if our education system had been designed considering our social, cultural, and geographical values (*CT4)

Additionally, there were mixed views on whether the SEE system was influenced by foreign aid and grants.

One participant shared, *I think it was designed to attract more foreign aid and grant because this system came in force without consulting the concerned stakeholders (*CT8).

Meanwhile, another participant expressed a different perspective, stating, *In the era of globalization, it is essential for Nepal to elevate its education standard to international levels (DT4)*

Another teacher highlighted this in a similar way.

The CGO has recognised that implementing the SEE without preparation is a retrogressive step. He further remarked, with a note of sarcasm, that our(he means all as Nepalese) mentality is such that we are dependent on the guidance of our elders and beg to study only when examinations are at hand. and added as

A CGO highlighted the issue of adopting Western educational models without adapting them to the local context: *In my point of view, yes, we have moved backward. In my individual perception, our philosophy, values, belief systems are different from the West. In our social system, still we believe in hierarchy. We have got that belief like; to do anything; we should be told by our senior; we should study only when the exam comes. In this social system, we brought the grading system without considering anything, which was adopted by well-advanced and autonomous Western society. We just picked up the system but didn't do any other preparation.* (CGO).

4.5.4.2 Adaptation of Western Model Education enough preparation

The SEE system uses educational models from Western nations, which typically do not fit Nepal's unique needs and contextual circumstances. Teachers and officials expressed concern that the system has been implemented in the absence of an appropriate system grounded in Nepal's cultural, geographic, and resource realities, and has been imposed without significant preparation or connection to the country's educational needs.

One teacher from a rural school also shared this experience in this manner.

Further emphasising this point, he added,

we haven't analysed the condition of our students, the access of our teachers, have we seen if teachers come to school regularly or not, or how students are being evaluated. Our country has got different geographical difficulties; we haven't tried to link those things. There are things, we should have kept into consideration and analyse them, if we have done this; today there wouldn't have been so many questions. What I am seeing as a gap here is, whatever we learn from foreign education; we should adapt and practice only after analysing our situation however, the essence and spirit have been gone while copying the foreign education system. While doing this, proper consultation and monitoring should be done by the government, there are no proper mechanisms to check those things... (A1T).

Overall, while there is recognition of the potential benefits of aligning Nepal's education system with global standards, there are significant concerns about the lack of preparation and the contextual fit of the SEE system. These views underscore the complex interplay between global standards and our educational practices. A teacher also used the metaphor to explain this situation as

……SEE is implemented in Nepal as an excellent quality plant where no one is watering the plant, government they implemented and left it without watering—eventually plant will die …. (A1T)

Similarly, Government official added as

This remark illustrates the whole divide between policy and practice. It is perceived that the SEE system is an import, and it has been implemented by as basically being a school-for-school model that has not been moulded and shaped to the educational sector in Nepal.

Foreign education has been brought into practice without understanding its context and essence. The country where we copied this education had no questions and issues of access, the teachers were of high quality, the students were high performers and it was for the country where students were studying together; therefore, the system was in good practice. In our context, we haven't researched it well; we have brought it into practice thinking it might do something better. (CGO).

The CGO discussed the problems created by the absence of contextualization of the SEE which leads to systemic problems in its implementation. He said that adoption of Western educational paradigms without appropriate localization in terms of context has created

inefficiencies and problems in implementation. He emphasized the need for appropriate research and study prior to adopting the

grading systems of developed countries. The lack of contextualization has led to systemic issues in implementing the SEE.

The adaptation of Western educational systems without proper contextualization was identified as a problem by the CGO. He noted that implementing foreign educational models without considering the local context led to inefficiencies and issues. Having discussion all the findings, I want to now share my experience on my observation about students' participants.

4.4 Observations of student participants

During the focus group discussions, I observed variations in how quickly students communicated their opinions. I experience that some students firstly were hesitant, while others provided more readily contribution to the discussion. I also sighted that private-school students generally occurred more confident in communicating their views, while some public-school students taken more time and support before contributing. Though, I found that these variances related primarily to how students shared rather than to significant variations in the content of their experiences. I also noticed differences in group dynamics, as some more confident students expressed their opinion more frequently, while quieter students occasionally expressed agreement through non-verbal responses, such as nodding, or expressed after I offered further inspiration.

4.5 Chapter summary

The results from the investigation into the Secondary Education Examination (SEE) indicate a nuanced set of both opportunities and challenges that have characterised the successful implementation of the SEE in Nepal's education system. The SEE system was implemented as a reform initiative to address concerns related to high levels of student failure and considerable levels of exam-associated stress. The SEE has, in part, addressed student exam stress and anxiety; however, it has also surfaced systemic issues that warrant attention to safeguard its long run.

Arguably, the SEE's most salient positive impacts arise from its efforts to reduce failure rates - students do not share the same anxiety and fear regarding exam performance as they did during the School Leaving Certificate (SLC) exams - and are less anxious since they will not have to hold back each year due to poor exam performance. Many students,

especially in public schools, have transitioned from traditional exam regimes, and benefitted from supportive and inclusive environments that foster educational success.

Valuable communication channels between students and teachers have also been enhanced because of the SEE system. Teachers have a better understanding of students' strengths and weaknesses (performance) from the grading system, enabling teachers to provide more targeted support, while simultaneously maintaining relationships in a way that increases student engagement and learning outcomes. The SEE system's flexibility to produce alternative learning environments - as with technical/pathway programs - helps define success for a range of academic abilities, which establishes students for a more inclusive, skilled worker-ready future. Despite the advantages that the SEE system has implemented, the students' lack of motivation is a serious issue, especially when teachers expressed that students have become complacent by knowing that they can pass with less effort. The SEE grading system has lessened the students' stress level, and this has affected the ambition of several students in that they know they can pass with very little effort. The concern is that the SEE system does not promote a high level of work ethic among students.

Differences in the awareness of the GPA system are another serious concern for students attending public and private schools. Although private-school students tend to be aware of what the GPA system is, public- school students were often unaware of what the grading criteria meant, creating confusion and inconsistency in students' academic planning. Clearly, there is a need for increased and improved communication and awareness as well as training for both students and teachers for the implementation of the SEE system to be effectively equitable across schools.

The data also indicated inadequacies in teacher training and a lack of government support. Teachers in both public and private schools expressed frustration by the lack of training opportunities or even resources to support the implementation of the SEE system. For many teachers, it was on their own time, and self-study and conversations with others created inequities in how the SEE system was applied across schools. Private-school teachers indicated that the government neglected to provide support with the SEE system, especially when compared to their public-school counterparts.

In conclusion, the SEE system has established a set of reforms that has greatly reduced the stress for students and teachers and diminished the number of failures since its implementation, and no doubt, the SEE system has its share of challenges relative to student motivation, understanding of the grading system, and support for teachers.

Appropriate teacher training, thoughtful communication, and equitable allocation of resources will all be incredibly important factors in ensuring that the SEE system meets its' desire for rationale in our improvement of quality education in Nepal.

The outcomes of this research based on previous chapters demonstrate a complex interrelationship between the reform goal of the Secondary Education Examination (SEE) in Nepal and realities of education both at the school level and within the system; however, this research also shows that the SEE reforms have been successful in some areas, while significant obstacles exist for the fair and productive implementation of the SEE. By integrating the findings of this research into a single area of focus, there will be a greater understanding of how the SEE has impacted the educational experience of each participant involved in the process i.e., students, teachers, schools, etc. The final chapter is planned to integrate the main themes discussed throughout this research to provide an integrated view of the opportunities and constraints identified by this study.

Chapter Five:

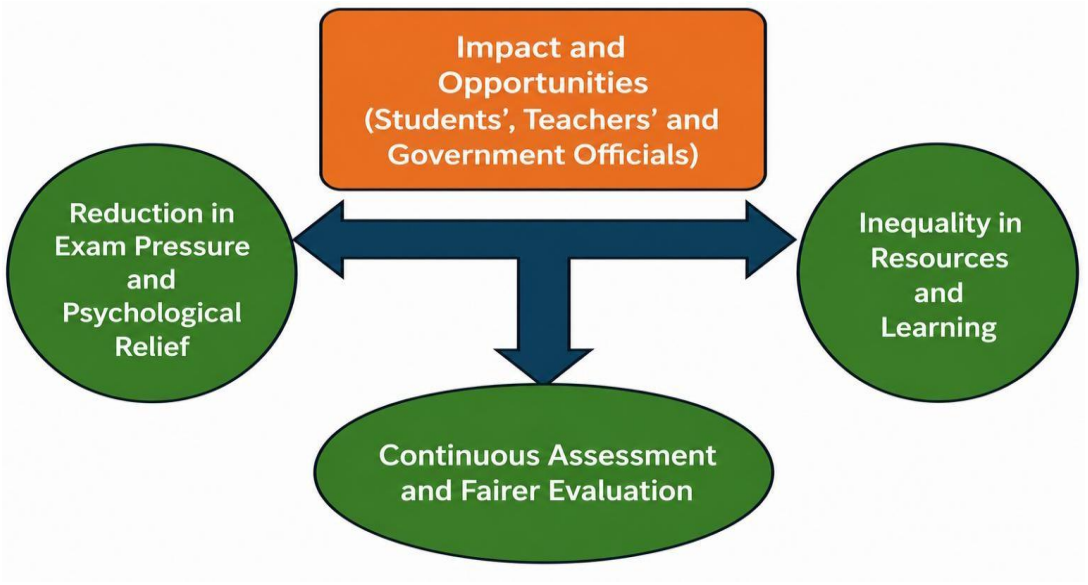


Figure 9: Framework of discussion chapter

The diagram above provides an overview of the dimensions discussed in this chapter.

5.1 Introduction.

This chapter presents a comprehensive of the findings in relation to the literature reviewed, including the pilot study discussion, which contains the raw data and initial findings, highlights the key themes that emerged from the main findings and discusses the key implications for students, teachers, as well as government officials. This chapter further examines the experiences of students, teachers, and government officials regarding the SEE examination.

The SEE was introduced to improve Nepal's education assessment system, shifting from a rigid pass/fail system to a more holistic, grading-based evaluation model. The new system was introduced to decentralise authorities, promote equity and enhance the quality of students' learning experiences.

This chapter discusses how the new system and reforms have been adopted by various stakeholders and their implications for sustainability and effectiveness.

The discussion chapter, which describes the experiences of the primary government leaders, teachers, and students, is divided into three sections. This transformation has reduced exam pressure and increased student involvement, but there are still issues with visible marking, inequalities between urban and rural areas, and resource sharing. By analysing these challenges, this chapter examines the effectiveness of SEE and compares it with assessment models in the literature review. This chapter also discusses the psychological effects of SEE on students, inconsistencies in grading, teacher awareness, and the pedagogical divide between urban and rural schools, as well as key findings from the existing literature.

In addition, this, the study explores the impact of federalisation on the implementation of SEE and discusses whether Nepal's grading system aligns with global education trends and best practices. It highlights the gap between policy intent and implementation in Nepal regarding the introduction of Federalism. The shift in focus from the federal government to provincial and local institutions has increased the significance of cooperation and capacity building.

5.1.1 Impacts and Opportunities of SEE

The implementation of the SEE system has manifold impacts on students, with students reporting decreased exam-related anxiety and improvements in well-being and learning experience. On the other hand, it has also shown notable challenges, including the inequitable distribution of resources, disparities between rural and urban schools, and reduced motivation among some students. This section discusses the students' experiences with SEE in relation to existing literature to draw a conclusion.

5.1.2 Reduction in Exam Pressure and Psychological Relief

One of the most consistent findings of this study is the reduction in examination-related stress among students due to the SEE system. Previously, the traditional SLC system, due to its rigid pass/fail nature, led to increased anxiety and societal pressure. In this study, participants have shared that eliminating the rigid pass/fail structure has helped them reduce the psychological burden associated with exams and given them the opportunity to be more relaxed under less time pressure.

Moreover, the findings show that students perceive SEE exams as less threatening and more conducive to learning, which aligns with international literatures in China and India in which the students had identified that high-stakes pass/fail exams has led to triggers for severe anxiety, such as depression, and in extreme cases even suicidal situations according to (Chung and Park, 2024; Fu, 2024; Deb et al., 2015).

Therefore, the implementation of the SEE system has significantly improved students' psychological well-being by changing their perspective on tests and putting them in a less stressful environment. Students are likely to be more creative and productive because of this stress reduction.

5.2.1.1 Psychological Benefits of Reduced Exam Pressure

The transition to the SEE system has led to a reduction in exam-related anxiety, improved psychological well-being, increased motivation and classroom engagement, as found in the findings of this study. Both students and teachers who participated in this study have shared positive impacts on students' psychology, emotional and mental state and positive attitude towards examinations after the implementation of the SEE grading system.

Numerous studies have examined the SLC examination system in Nepal (Mathema and Bista, 2006b; Ministry of Education, 2015; UNESCO, 2016). Similarly, Davies (2016) identified the challenges of SLC and highlighted the importance of the changes in SEE. The SEE system is already in place; however, very few studies have examined the opportunities and challenges of the current system. Hypertension and depression can be avoided by the grading system, as many suicide cases have been reduced according to all the participants, even though the link is not shown. A student in the initial pilot study mentioned that 'in SLC we used to hear about many suicidal cases; now we do not hear this since the SEE is in place.

In contrast to the traditional pass/fail model used in SLC, the newly implemented SEE system does not label low-scoring students as complete failures; rather, it grades them as non-graded, giving some chance of promotion to higher classes and further studies. Exams are seen as less definitive under this grading scheme, which reduces the disastrous outcomes historically associated with failure. A significant psychological shift was observed in this study, as students often reported that the new method enabled them to view academic assessments as developmental rather than critical. Teachers have also shared that students have become more enthusiastic, participating more in classes and showing less exam-related fear.

These findings are supported by Sung et al. (2016) and Kjaergaard et al. (2023), both of which argue that reduced anxiety in academic environments is directly and positively correlated with improved cognitive performance and classroom participation. According to these studies, stress-free learning environments increase working memory, enhance information retention, and foster the kind of emotional safety that allows students to focus on learning rather than fear of failure.

A theoretical link is also evident in my findings, where students reported that removing the fear of failure encouraged them to approach exams with a fear-free mindset. Teachers also observed these behavioural changes among students in the classroom, noting that students were more confident and willing to participate. The government officials, in their interviews, also confirmed this, stating that "the depressive feelings associated with the old system had been replaced by a widespread sense of relief about passing the exam". Hence, international literature findings are also reflected in the Nepali context.

These findings also address the first research question, revealing that students and teachers experience the SEE as a major improvement.

The study shows that the SEE system has encouraged students to perceive academic challenges, including examinations, as opportunities for growth rather than threats. These results are supported by Anoita et al. (2020), which highlight that flexible and enhanced evaluation models alleviate students' psychological and mental health concerns. By removing the pressure of an all-or-nothing exam result, such systems accelerate a mastery orientation, in which students attempt to learn, recover, and recognise their perceptions, rather than a performance orientation driven solely by marks or external validation.

This motivational shift was evident in students' exam-preparation behaviours. The students have reported that the new SEE system has led them to shift from rote memorisation to studying for conceptual understanding and application-based learning. This can be observed in their willingness to ask questions, engage in discussions and seek additional resources, as shared by the teachers in this study. This shift has been especially relevant, as the SLC exam has led to increased motivation, reduced dropout rates, and enhanced students' self-esteem (Sung et al., 2016).

The psychological relief and benefits of reduced exam pressure under SEE had potential long-term benefits of reducing depression and anxiety, which have become increasingly prevalent in competitive educational contexts (Kjaergaard et al., 2013). Exam-related stress

and anxiety are lessened with SEE, a more adaptable and formative assessment method that also improves coping mechanisms and resilience.

Thus, the transition to the SEE grading system has led to notable improvements in students' psychology by eliminating the fear and risk associated with the traditional high-stakes pass/fail model and promoting a more flexible, formative approach. It has created an environment for underlying motivation, active discussions, and sustained academic encounters. This has led to student-centric learning practices, positioning it with global developments.

This is also a positive step forward for the Nepalese education system, where students have described their exam experience as wonderful, with no fear of failure; it signals an insightful and positive shift from an old education system that was considered an Iron Gate. While many challenges remain, this educational shift is a positive development for Nepal's students now and in the future.

5.1.1.1 Concerns Over Complacency and Reduced Academic Rigour

As revealed in the findings of this study, although the SEE system has led to psychological benefits for the students, the teachers have shared some concerns that the SEE system can lead to decreased students' motivation and rigour due to the perception that they will not totally fail; rather, they can pass with a lower grade. This can further lead to decreased motivation and a lack of seriousness in examinations, as students may perceive that the SEE system does not properly distinguish between high and low performance. The findings align with Joshi (2024), who revealed that teachers have reported that while the SEE system has decreased stress, it has led to an increase in academic complacency among students.

The findings of the study are consistent with Black and Wiliam (1998), who argue that one unintended consequence of removing the risk of failure is a decrease in students' interest and commitment to their studies. Research conducted in India in 2023 supports the finding that a flexible assessment paradigm has led students to be less rigorous in their pursuit of success, as it demonstrates that lower marks can still have positive consequences.

For students in Nepal, this shift from traditional education to the new system is critical. The new changes have removed the pressure of the SLC and have created a comfortable environment for students, but in doing so, they may be failing to prepare students and provide the deep learning required for long-term success. Further evidence that a flexible assessment paradigm has made students less demanding in their quest for improved

performance comes from a 2023 study conducted in India, which suggests that lower grades can still have advantages. Similarly, one teacher mentioned that students are moving to the next level without adequate knowledge. This suggests that the SEE system has also created risks of issuing a certificate without competency. The reform, therefore, faces a fundamental challenge: how to make these new changes more competent without compromising the deep learning.

5.1.1.2 ***Balancing Reduced Exam Pressure with Academic Motivation***

The grading systems in developed countries have moved from rigid, summative assessments to more flexible, formative and continuous assessment models. Systems like the UK's General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), India's Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), and Hong Kong's Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (HKDSE) use formative assessments, differentiated student-centric instruction and project-based learning (BSE, 2024). US schools have already begun incorporating standards-based and competency-based models (Reeves, 2011). This primarily addresses issues related to grade inflation, inequality, and lack of clarity. Similar cases can be found in Finland, which has shifted towards feedback and formative assessment in primary and lower secondary education (Sahlberg, 2015).

The transition to the SEE system calls for balancing the exam-related pressure with academic motivation, as the absence of a clear risk of failure and a lack of a clear difference between high and low performance can lead to complacency. Rudland et al. (2020), who have supported the benefits of mild exam stress in improving resilience, motivation, and continued academic success, corroborate these findings. According to research, a healthy amount of stress is necessary for learning and can greatly inspire students to work toward their academic goals. Extrinsic motivation factors such as recognition and grades can also serve as motivators, particularly when students are not motivated by internal factors, as stated in Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan, 1985).

Despite reducing stress among students, this could lead to unfavourable circumstances, such as students becoming disengaged from their studies (Rudland et al., 2020). Formative assessment models, continuous feedback, and an individualised, student-centric teaching/learning environment are essential for balancing exam pressure and students' motivation. Further, the findings are also supported by Harlen and Deakin-Crick (2002),

which emphasises that some degree of stress and performance-related accountability is vital for supporting students' motivation and encouraging effort. Therefore, educational systems must find a middle ground that supports students' well-being without compromising their drive to succeed.

However, my research finding reveal that Nepal has adopted the international academic model without enough preparation. We have changed our system to letter grading system without training teachers and without building enough infrastructure for its proper implementing. The teachers have clearly shown their dissatisfaction in many ways and have said that - it looks modern from outside, but internal structure is not as it is supposed to be. The evidence from this study is mixed. On one hand, it seems huge success as it reduces fear. On the other hand, it appears to be failing to maintain the quality of education. The changes have been able to remove the negative pressure of failure, but to build a system that inspires students to strive for excellence is questionable.

In addition, this stress is not unique to Nepal. Experience of India with CCE produce an important regional comparison. (Yagnamurthy, 2017) in their valuation of CCE found that even though continuous assessment was projected to advance learning through regular evaluation, it did not generate significant developments in students' test scores. They argued that assessment reform alone was insufficient when the information generated through assessment was not adequately associated to changes in classroom teaching methods. This finding closely reveals the experiences reported in my study. While the SEE has reduced the fear associated with the previous pass/fail system, changes in grading alone cannot necessarily improve learning unless they are accompanied by changes in pedagogy, teacher preparation and classroom practice. The experience of India therefore suggests that Nepal should not regard the introduction of letter grading as an end, but as one component of a wider process of educational reform.

5.1.2 Continuous Assessment and Fairer Evaluation

Despite SEE causing some students to feel less motivated, students as well as teachers positively acknowledged the SEE system because of transition from a high-stakes, one-time examination to a more balanced evaluation approach, as students can advance to next level despite having lower marks in few subjects. Rather than being labelled as failure due to the performance in final exams in SLC, the new SEE system allows the students to demonstrate their abilities over time by allowing them to promote to higher studies despite

lower marks in some subjects. For example, SEE students are promoted to study year 11 for continuous growth and assessment even if they have failed in some subject of SEE year 10 which allows students to re-sit exam to either pass the exam or improve their grade while studying in year 11. Therefore, the transition to SEE which includes more continuous and flexible assessment model lead to increase in motivation and reduction of academic related stress among the students. These favourable results align with the research findings of Pal (2022). Less intimidating assessments and flexible marking strategies can boost students' interest and participation, claim Pacharn, Bay, and Felton (2013).

In this study, both the teachers and students have positively received the SEE system sharing that it has led to a progressive reform transitioning from high-stake pass/fail exam to formative assessment approach which has enabled the teachers to plan accordingly with the students' level of understanding and capabilities, without having to limit the students based on lower marks in few subjects. This has led to a fairer assessment of students' performance over period and secure the students' future without having to solely rely on the marks obtained in final examinations. Supported by existing literature (Liu, 2015; Ding, 2023; Crooks, 2002), continuous assessment not only promotes student motivation and engagement but also helps reduce exam-related stress, making it a more student-centred and psychologically supportive evaluation model.

The findings of my study show that if SEE is implemented with integrity, this approach can significantly improve students' educational experience. Some students have reported that teachers are giving more time, that their concerns have been heard, and that tangible support has been provided. This has created an environment where exams feel more manageable. This change makes the student's daily school experience more comfortable.

5.1.2.1 Challenges in Grading Consistency and Teacher Preparedness

The findings in this study indicate the challenge of accurately measuring GPA in the SEE system and inconsistencies in grading among teachers across rural and urban schools. As grading can be based on teachers' subjective judgements, students have reported frustration with inconsistent grading practices. Moreover, both teachers and students share confusion about GPA assessment in the SEE system due to inconsistent grading. Teachers in rural areas have also reported a lack of clear understanding of how students are graded and difficulties in assessing the theoretical versus practical components. The inconsistency in grading practices is attributed to subjective judgements based due to lack of proper trading in applying the grading structures (Dhakal and Bhurtel, 2023; Guskey, 2009).

Despite the advantages of the SEE system, the lack of a standardised assessment method has been one of Nepal's main issues, according to Pal (2022). One study in Bangladesh also shows similar findings, in which grading lacks clear implementation guidelines, and teachers may subjectively inflate or deflate grades (Goswami and Mumit, 2018).

Inconsistencies in GPA calculation and a lack of teacher preparedness pose major challenges to the reliability of the SEE grading system. The teachers in this study indicated that these issues stem from insufficient training and the absence of standardised assessment guidelines. To ensure fairness, there is a vital need for transparent, reliable grading standards and the consistent development of teachers' capabilities.

The research in this study indicates a lack of guidance for teachers on the grading process and procedures, which has created confusion among students as well. One of the students expressed his frustration, saying that we can't see the exact numbers that we have received, while another found the grading not clear. More worryingly, the lack of oversight in the practical exams undermines the result supports Pal (2022) and Kusin (2022), which have shown that achieving merit in teaching and learning involves well-trained, skilled teachers with strong technical expertise. The lack of training and awareness among teachers from rural areas as well as urban areas, due to a lack of clear criteria, has led to inequality and inconsistent outcomes, as reported in this study. Nithlavarnan (2024) has shown similar concerns where the students from rural areas in Sri Lanka face the problem of inconsistencies in grading due to resource constraints and inadequate teachers' awareness of grading criteria and evaluation procedures. Students' motivation and performance have decreased because of the inconsistent and non-existent standards. There were observable differences in views of fairness and academic performance within the SEE system because of the unfair distribution of resources and insufficient teacher preparation. Students from the rural areas are deprived because of limited access to educational resources, including qualified teachers, learning materials, despite these rural students being expected to meet the same academic standards as their collaborator's urban counterparts. According to a countryside student in this study, some even find it difficult to complete the curriculum, and there aren't enough teachers to keep an eye on their development. This illustrates why students in country areas said they were unjustly handled in terms of resource distribution and were less influenced.

SEE system's credibility, where the teachers are giving full practical marks regardless of actual performance. This creates unfair treatment for better students. Without clear

guidance and standardisation, it is impossible to provide fair, accurate and meaningful evaluation of students' abilities and learning.

5.1.3 Inequality in Resources and Learning Environments

The findings of this study reported that rural schools in Nepal lacked adequate educational resources, including proper libraries and extra classes, due to which rural students feeling of sense of unfairness and inequality when comparing the availability of resources in urban schools. In urban schools, where better training and resources are available, students tend to achieve better results, and with higher confidence. As literature depicts, the rural–urban differences identified in this study can be interpreted through Chambers' (1983) concept of 'urban bias', which draws attention to how policies developed within centres of political and administrative power may not fully reflect the everyday realities of rural communities. This perspective is particularly relevant to the SEE, where the same national expectations are applied across schools operating under very different conditions. Similar inequalities are evident elsewhere in South Asia. Similarly, Agrawal (2014) found there has been rural -urban differences in access to education and attainment and inequalities in infrastructure and the volume of secondary and high secondary are higher in urban area while Singh and Sharma (2009) depict the constraints in access to basic and secondary educational facilities in rural India.

In Pakistan, Tayyaba (2012) similarly identified rural–urban differences in educational achievement and schooling conditions, including disparities in teacher and school-related characteristics. These regional experiences reflect the findings of the present study, where rural participants reported more limited access to teachers, infrastructure and learning resources, while urban schools were generally better placed to respond to changes in assessment. The comparison suggests that the challenge identified in Chitwan is not simply a problem with grading itself. Rather, it raises the question of whether a nationally standardised reform can produce equitable outcomes when schools begin from substantially different levels of resources and institutional capacity.

5.2 Challenges of SEE Implementation

In the context of implementing the SEE system in Nepal, the experiences of teachers reveal the ground-level realities and complexities in implementing the system. The section further explains the challenges of SEE implementation by highlighting the findings of this study, including the need for proper training and standardisation, increased teacher involvement, and the need to reduce the disparities of resources across different schools and regions.

5.2.1 Lack of Training and Standardised Implementation

The effective implementation of any new educational reforms, including the Secondary Education Examination (SEE) system in Nepal, depends on the capacity of teachers to implement the system. One of the persistent challenges identified in this study is the implementation of SEE without proper teacher training, which has led to confusion in interpreting and applying letter grades to measure students' performance. The findings align with earlier research by Thapa (2012), who found that in public schools, teachers lacked accountability towards students, pupil-teacher ratios were high, management was poor, and training in teaching and evaluating students was low. The inadequate training of teachers has led to uniform interpretation, ultimately resulting in subjective biases, grading errors, and inequity in student outcomes, directly addressing the second research question.

Kafle (2020) also supports this concern; in his study, he highlighted that inadequate teacher training has led to variations in assessment and grading. practices among different schools. This variability can further lead to a lack of standardisation in grading practices, which may be based on teachers' subjective judgement and undermine the true purpose of the SEE system. Because results are

The primary barrier to implementing the SEE in Nepal has been inadequate training and implementation processes (Pal, 2022). Although the SEE is designed to be an assessment model that evaluates students with more comprehensive and equity-minded evaluations, it will depend on the successful implementation of the process by all stakeholders, undertaken according to teachers' subjective

Given the understanding of the marking scheme, there are concerns about fairness and grading irregularities.

Townsley and Wilcox (2024) argue that such disparate evaluation techniques could compromise grade comparability and reliability, ultimately affecting the validity of the SEE system. Similar findings can be found in studies of Goswami and Mumit (2018) in Bangladesh where teachers subjectively inflate or deflate grades due to lack of official grading implementation protocols. Such practices undermine the true purpose of the grading system and compromise students' academic integrity.

Due to a lack of clarity and transparency in standardisation, some teachers can resort to intentionally falsifying grades to serve institutional motives such as increasing school pass rates or protecting students from parental backlash (Taylor, 2007). These behaviours, although well-intentioned in some cases, distort students' academic records. Without

proper guidance and opportunities for capacity development, teachers are left to interpret grading and assessment practices on their own. Pal (2022) and Chapagain (2020) claim that the grading practices in Nepal are judgemental and based on peer assumptions and trial-and-error methods.

Countries that have successfully implemented evaluation systems have highlighted the importance of centralised digital platforms, such as computerised GPA calculators (OECD, 2022). These modern, innovative tools can help reduce subjective biases and errors, promoting reliability, equity, and easy comparability of assessments, even in an international context. Thus, Nepal also requires such investments in necessary digital infrastructures, especially to align the SEE system with global assessment standards. Thus, for SEE to be successful and fulfil its objectives, teacher training should be prioritised. This can be done through continuous professional development (CPD) that is more inclusive and adaptable to meet specific needs (OECD, 2022). It's successful including teachers. This calls for empowering teachers with the necessary skills, tools, and clarity in grading practices to improve the credibility, fairness, and legitimacy of the SEE system.

The findings of this study reveal the limited assessment literacy shared among teachers and officials. The teachers lacked awareness and training in evaluating students against predefined standards, providing continuous, personalised feedback, and interpreting results. These findings align with Adhikari (2019), which highlights the value of evaluation literacy for the accomplishment of SEE reform. Without proper knowledge of assessment principals, teachers tend to use subjective judgements and inflate/deflate the grades (Goswami and Mumit, 2018). Similarly, the teachers require ongoing professional development to enhance their knowledge of assessment literacy for uniform practice by teachers across the country. Moreover, I will return to considering this in my conclusion and recommendations.

Furthermore, Yagna Murthy (2017) finding depicts that teachers have received training however the practicing the training did changes the classroom pedagogy. The study emphasised the importance of continuous teacher engagement, flexible assessment arrangements and decentralised decision-making for effective implementation. Similarly, Kannan and Naidu (2022) recognised that there are actual issues with collecting information from students for reporting determinations; a lack of time; a vast numeral of student records and a managerial burden in keeping all their evaluation records. All these are insight of the results from my research as well; when I asked teachers how they found

concerning the SEE reform, they expressed frustrations about the many tasks related to the reform and the difference between what it was theoretical to be like and what it is really like. The findings suggest that successful assessment reform requires teachers not only to understand how to record and grade performance, but also to know how assessment information should inform subsequent teaching and support for individual learners. This distinction is important for the present study. The difficulties reported by teachers in Chitwan therefore indicate a wider issue of assessment literacy rather than simply unfamiliarity with the SEE grading scale. Teacher preparation for SEE needs to connect grading, feedback, curriculum and pedagogical practice if the reform is to influence students' learning meaningfully.

5.2.2 Increased Engagement and Support Roles

In this study, teachers have expressed that SEE had led to more student-centric classroom environments. Apart from the burden of preparing students for exams, teachers were able to engage students through discussion, group work, and project-based learning, which led to a greater focus on understanding rather than just preparing for exams. Teachers have also acknowledged the increased expectation to guide, counsel and motivate students on an ongoing basis. The findings concur with Pacharn, Bay, and Felton(2013) and Anoita et al. (2020), who have argued that flexible evaluation systems can empower learners to enhance long-term learning outcomes by developing the ability to apply concepts in new contexts and develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

The transition to continuous assessment models in SEE requires teachers to observe, guide and evaluate students' progress on a more continuous and consistent basis. This aims to deepen teacher-student relationships and provide personalised feedback and support. Literature supports this trend linking to. Anoita et al. (2020) highlighted that regular and continuous feedback to students can help identify students' strengths and weaknesses and enable timely interventions to address any limitations or weaknesses. Continuous assessment has increased the workload of teachers, including additional responsibilities for teachers, such as evaluating each project and providing personalised feedback. Teachers from both public and private schools are often unprepared to handle the expanded responsibilities and demands from the SEE (Kafle, 2020).

The SEE system has encouraged a shift toward more student-centred teaching practices, allowing teachers to move beyond exam preparation and engage students through

interactive and collaborative methods engaging the students rather than focusing only on exam-oriented study. For instance, students have reported having more opportunities to learn through technical education and skill-based programs, which helped them explore career options that align with their strengths. This change has not only enhanced student engagement but also expanded teachers' roles to include ongoing guidance and support . This was evident from the study conducted on this group of students in Chitwan District of Nepal.

The findings of this study also reveal the teachers' narratives, which reflect more than logistical challenges; they point out how the teachers perceive their professional identity. Some teachers have shared that they feel more empowered by their expanded roles, while others have felt an additional burden to learn and implement new systems, especially regarding incentives or recognition. This concurs with findings by Baraily and Sherpa (2022), who stated that teachers' roles and responsibilities have expanded from content deliverer to learner evaluator; however, this shift has become uneven, particularly in public schools in rural areas.

The SEE system has positive motivational consequences for teachers. Teachers have reported that they have become more energised by the opportunity to use project-based and collaboration-based teaching. This system improves teachers' motivation, and proper encouragement and direction can play a focal role in the effective implementation of SEE (Dhungel, 2023).

5.3.3 Pedagogical Differences Between Urban and Rural Schools

The study highlights the difference in resource allocation among urban and rural schools: while urban schools had begun to implement modern strategies, such as project-based learning, use of digital tools and continuous feedback, this is missing in the case of rural schools. In this study, all the urban schools studied a module called Computer Science as part of the Secondary Education Examination (SEE) Curriculum. However, rural schools need access to sufficient computer labs and classrooms; due to resource constraints, it is tough for them to offer the same modules. This highlights a significant disparity in digital education between urban and rural schools. The data obtained from this study is consistent with the findings of the World Bank (2023). It indicates that there is a substantial difference between publicly designed information and communication technology (ICT) policy improvement and the way in which these policies are observed and used within disciplines. Though such strategies as the School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) 2016-

2023 have been planned with very clear strategies for integrating ICT into education; nevertheless, many rural schools do not have access to the necessary resources or the mandatory knowledge to execute these plans. The report shows that urban schools are better positioned to follow these policies, whereas rural schools face both infrastructural and informational barriers. This variance contributes to the ongoing digital divide in Nepal's education system between rural and urban schools.

The results of this analysis show that the availability of necessary infrastructure is minimal and notably poor in rural areas. The students have shared that urban schools use digital books and learning management systems, while students in rural schools are limited to traditional paper-based resources; this was part of the findings from this study.

Digital technologies enhance transparency, provide effective and efficient/real time feedback and reduce manual administrative burden for teachers according to (OCED, 2019). The digital divide in Nepal creates rural-urban differences in the quality of assessments and instruction, and there is also a large pedagogical and digital divide between urban and rural schools in Nepal, driven by the availability of physical infrastructure, technological resources, and professional development opportunities for teachers.

Urban schools have introduced a combination of new instructional methodologies and technologies that use ICT tools aligned with SEE goals, whereas the outcomes of this research indicate that rural schools continue to rely on outdated educational practices due to limited availability of digital resources and implementation support. The difference between these two groups establishes a larger systemic disparity within the education system; while nationwide policy outlines, such as the SSDP, are well expressed, they are not implemented effectively at the rural level with inadequate resources. Students in private and urban public schools have access to well-trained teachers, modern classrooms and infrastructure, whereas those in rural villages often lack basic subject textbooks and structured lesson plans (Mathema and Bista,2006). Teachers in rural school's struggle to align teaching methods with assessment criteria, creating inequalities in Nepal's education system (Pal, 2022).

The urban-rural differences bordered within this research can be interpreted through Chambers' (1983) model of urban bias. It suggests how educational resource accessibility and education policy may prioritize cities at the expense of rural areas. This would run a justificationfor why the same SEE reform is identified as different when rural schools

have less sources and capacity to implement change. In other countries such as neighbouring India and Pakistan, similar provincial disparities exist with rural schools and under-resourced schools continuing to suffer from inequities despite being elaborated in educational reforms (Agrawal, 2014; Tayyaba, 2012). The data from these localities suggest that the variations seen in Chitwan are not simply because of grading systems but reveal larger structural variations that could change how educational reforms are applied.

5.2 Policy Challenges and Future Considerations

Government actors, such as government officials, are responsible for policy design, implementation and evaluation of the education system. The findings from the study show the complexities of implementing the SEE system in terms of experiences from Government officials' point of view. This section explores the challenges faced in the experience of government officials, including lack of transparency in grading, the impact of federalism, SEE's alignment with global educational trends and capacity gaps in local governments.

5.3 Lack of Transparency in Grading

The shift to SEE aimed to replace the rigid percentage-based pass/fail model with a letter-grading system. However, this reform has exposed a critical structural weakness: the absence of transparency in grading criteria and GPA calculation methods (GPA stands for Grade Point Average), which are calculated using proprietary formulae. Government officials in this study reported a gap in teachers' training across all provinces of Nepal and confusion on grading practices faced by students and teachers, namely, the lack of publicly accessible grading rubrics, unclear GPA computation rules, and inconsistencies across educational boards, which this study indicates have led to confusion and mistrust in the assessment process. During the pilot interviews, one of the students in the study mentioned that private school students. For e.g.: according to participant 5…. A student who scores 90-99 will receive the same grade, which is not fair… However, Sharma (2014) has also explored the advantages and disadvantages of the grading system in India, which remains to be examined in phase 2 of this study (focus Group discussion with students). Therefore, one of the findings has matched India, not other countries like the USA (Kleinman, Leidman and Longcore, 2018) and Sweden (Guskey and Link, 2018). Therefore, this study aims to give a better understanding of the experiences with the grading system among more school students, teachers, DEOs, and Central government officials, and will be described further in the discussion below. The rationale for conducting

this study is a purely knowledge-based contribution to the experiences of students and teachers with the new grading system (SEE) in Nepal (Chitwan district).

Khanal et al (2023) emphasise that SEE grading practices in Nepal lack coherence and comparability, primarily due to a lack of centralised supervision, which is a major challenge. This results in variability between schools and provinces, which further challenges the fairness, equity, and reliability of the SEE system. As shown in the findings of this study, due to the absence of proper training and insufficient resources, rural schools have struggled with implementing regular grading practices and systems.

The lack of consistency and transparency in GPA calculation has led to barriers in comparisons across several institutions. There are various examples of uneven GPA input and processing in Nepali universities, according to Pokhrel's (2024) results instances of ineffectiveness while administering academic records and converting grades into GPA are found in Nepal (Pokhrel, 2024). These instances of lack of transparency in grading practices have led to student dissatisfaction and a rise in questions about the

fairness of grading practices.

UNESCO (2019) have shared a major concern that the lack of transparency in grading practices can diminish public trust in the academic system and lead to a negative impact on the overall credibility of the assessment system. The lack of transparency influences students' potential in their application process to attend a university in a country other than Nepal due to possibly different grading systems used there compared to those that are commonly used throughout the world (Bajracharya, 2021). There also seems to be a lack of standardised GPA to percentage conversion system in Nepal, as the GPA cannot specify the marks obtained by the students in exact quantitative terms, due to which, students may need to provide secondary documentation or take additional tests (e.g. SAT or IELTS) which leads to additional burden for the students (Bajracharya, 2021).

This is due to a lack of proper training and standards to guide the teachers, and therefore each teacher will be forced to make their own interpretations of how to apply the grade scale, which leads to an unintended increase or reduction in grades based upon the teacher's individual opinions. The lack of clarity and the subjectivity with which teachers apply the GPA system cause uncertainty and devalue the GPA system as an accurate representation of students' academic abilities. Due to this inconsistency in grading, students have less desire to prepare for exams and have fewer specific goals to work toward improvement (Dhungel, 2023). Since the grading process lacks consistency

and is unpredictable, students cannot establish goals to improve, as stated by Dhungel (2023).

Furthermore, the findings of Paudel and Panday (2018) show that the inconsistencies of grading practices in subsequent higher education levels in grades 11 and 12 have led to structural mismatch. Students who have passed SEE exams with lower marks in subjects find it difficult to pass examinations in higher levels. The lack of transparency in benchmarks for promoting students to higher classes led to poor performance later in higher education (Paudel and Pandey, 2018).

5.2.3 The Role of Federalisation and Its Impact on SEE Implementation

Federalism in Nepal was introduced to transform the centralised governance structure into a more inclusive and participatory system to facilitate equitable access to resources across all regions of Nepal. Federalism introduced in 2015 in Nepal is aimed at empowering marginalised communities by decentralising the power relating to various infrastructure development, including education, to the local communities (Karki,2014). The transfer of primary responsibility for the SEE examination to local bodies has been a significant policy change under Nepal's federalised governance.

Despite the positive intent of federalism, it has faced various operational and structural challenges. Among the main issues facing the system are rising expenses, a lack of skilled human resources, and collaboration between the federal, provincial, and local levels of government (MoEST, 2021). Similar findings have been found in this study, where government officials have shared the lack of resources in local bodies to support SEE implementation and training for teachers. Acharya (2018) has also highlighted the lack of financial and administrative systems, such as human resources and protocols for procurement and oversight, which are crucial for local units to function. Because of these challenges, transitioning seamlessly to a federalist structure in Nepal has been difficult, and, as a result, effective implementation of the SEE curriculum has been hindered.

Authority being decentralised to the Provincial and Local levels has resulted in varied administration of exams, resulting in variable and inconsistent grading and educational quality (Pal, 2022). Furthermore, the interviews conducted within this study reported similar disparities in terms of the infrastructure, resources and training provided to teachers in rural versus urban provinces. The discussions described that the absence of appropriate organization such as internet connectivity, standardized schoolrooms and sufficient human resources have impacted the capability to require a reasonable opportunity for all students.

This was attributed to a lack of clarity regarding the roles of each level (federal, provincial, local) and poor interaction and organisation at the implementation level, which subsequently led to confusion (Luitel, 2021).

Pal (2022) focuses on how federalism has led to split governance, widening the gap between counties in Nepal. The difference in the enforcement or evaluation of grading can be seen between urban and rural schools. It has further led to confusion among teachers and administrators due to policy misalignment and a lack of proper coordination between the central government and other tiers of government. For instance, a lack of uniformity in exam scheduling, exam administration, question moderation, and grading practices has led to inconsistent grading practices. In my study, the findings match those reported in the section above, titled the implications of federalisation imposed upon SEE. This has also undermined teachers' motivation due to a lack of proper and timely guidance on assessment procedures.

While the decentralisation of education services through SEE was aimed at improving responsiveness to local needs, it has created a major challenge in its implementation. Sharma et al. (2020) have revealed that federalism in Nepal has encountered challenges in implementing quality-promise mechanisms. This has affected the reliability and fairness of SEE outcomes, particularly when SEE is used as a benchmark for students' performance in higher education.

The benefits of education in Federalism are distributed unevenly throughout the regions of Nepal, leading to a policy-practice gap and an inability for local governments to generate sufficient funding for teacher development programs needed for effective implementation of SEE. The lack of an Integrated System limits Capacity Development at Local Levels and coordination across all layers of Government in the development of teachers and the implementation of SEE. Therefore, the successful implementation of SEE is a significant obstacle in the current federalist structure.

5.2.2 SEE's Alignment with Global Education Trends

The introduction of the SEE system in Nepal was a deliberate step towards aligning the national assessment system with global educational practices (Pal, 2022). As shared by Pal (2022), the shift towards SEE aimed at replacing the rigid, summative-based assessment model with more flexible, formative, and continuous assessment models. The shift to SEE aimed to foster student-centric learning, reduce exam pressure, and improve comparability with international standards/frameworks.

Formative assessments, differentiated student-centric instruction, and project-based learning systems are all used in international examination systems like the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) in the United Kingdom, the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) in India, and the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (HKDSE) in Hong Kong (CBSE, 2024).

The grading practices adopted by developed economies emphasise continuous evaluation, criterion-referenced grading, and application-based testing directed towards assessing the attitude, skills and knowledge of the students (CBSE, 2024).

In the process of implementing similar grading practices in Nepal, the contextual adaptation has hindered its implementation process. The findings revealed from this study show that the SEE system has been influenced by foreign grading systems, yet its implementation occurred in the context of a lack of proper infrastructure, digital capacity and teachers' preparedness necessary to support the transition. The introduction of SEE was introduced without proper groundwork for systemic readiness, as shared by government officials in this study.

Padhaya et al. (2021) maintain this finding by emphasising that copying models of other countries without reflection of local context can steer external reform. Without proper resources to assist the reform in the local context, it can lead to confusion rather than enhancement. In Nepal, especially in rural areas, due to a lack of proper resources and awareness among teachers, this has led to a major challenge for teachers to properly implement the SEE system.

Moreover, the alignment of the SEE examination to global trends aims to make Nepal's education and assessment system comparable. Students in pursuit of higher studies, the students who apply to foreign universities, have an additional burden to take additional exams such as SATs, IELTS, etc to validate their academic credentials. Soh (2011) discusses the psychological toll and administrative complications of GPA systems when applied across diverse educational and cultural contexts. Soh illustrates how grading systems, particularly in overseas admissions practices, cause students to become puzzled and anxious when they are deprived of consistent recognition or clarification. These worries are displayed in the current form of SEE, as many students feel hindered when applying to foreign universities because of blurred GPA calculations and difficulties with grade inflation. This has created a tangible barrier to students' global mobility.

5.4.3 Capacity Gaps in Local Governments and Education Units

One of the challenges highlighted in the findings of this study was limited resources as well as the institutional capacity of local governments. Although the primary responsibility for education has shifted to local/provincial bodies, they were unable to provide sufficient training and assistance to the teachers as well as necessary resources for the students, especially in rural areas.

Gaps were observed among the teachers in their knowledge and expertise in assessment, monitoring, and evaluation.

The findings are consistent with Acharya (2018), who criticises the federal structure of Nepal, where sufficient time and the required increase in efficiency or resources have not been provided for the purpose of ensuring a smooth transition to the modern SEE system. In rural areas of the country, no formal training is given to the teachers in educational assessments; thus, they have shown inconsistent application of grading regulations, as shown by the evidence of the present findings.

5.3 Theoretical and Practical Implications

5.3.1 Theoretical Contribution

The Change Theory (Fullan, 2016) suggests that a combination of teacher involvement, equitable resource distribution and clear assessment guidelines is important for effective educational reforms. Fullan (2016) shares that if teachers are going to help students develop their skills and competencies in knowledge creation, teachers need to experience themselves in building professional knowledge. Fullan further highlights that shared vision and ownership are more an outcome of quality processes than they are a precondition. Fullan argues that it is not enough to mandate new practices; rather, institutions must invest in continuous professional development and create a favourable environment where teachers as well as students feel empowered to innovate and adopt.

Fullan also highlights the change process and argues that it can be complex, involving challenges, uncertainties and resistance. His theory encourages persistence and flexible learning. The findings of this study reinforce the Change Theory and suggest that policy-level decisions alone are not sufficient, and educational change must be gradually implemented with holisticengagement from all stakeholders, including teachers, students, as well as government officials (policymakers).

My research data demonstrates that only the announcement of the policy shift from SLC to SEE is not sufficient. My research shows that the missing part is the capacity-building and

ownership among the key stakeholders. Criticism from teachers that everything they have learned is because of self-study illustrates that this educational reform was implemented with little to no input or consultation from the subject matter experts (the teachers). Therefore, to create meaningful change, the policy must be accompanied by sustained, practical, and inclusive professional development that empowers teachers to understand and believe in the new system.

Additionally, this research confirms Vygotsky's Social Constructivism (1978), which focuses on ways institutional, social, and cultural aspects impact learning. Vygotsky primarily published social constructivism, a socio-cultural principle of intellectual development that features the need of social communication in learning, in 1978. A key idea of the theory is the Zone of Proximal Development, which illustrates the gap between what learners can learn independently and what they can learn with guidance from others. This proves how crucial it is for teachers to monitor their students' education and offer feedback.

Another crucial element of Vygotsky's theory is the use of language as a cultural tool. He underlined the importance of dialogue, engagement, and teamwork in fostering learning. It also highlights the importance of designing instruction according to learners' cultural backgrounds and levels of understanding, and of promoting adaptive, student-centric teaching strategies.

In the SEE context, teachers are intended to be more knowledgeable than others. However, when these teachers are themselves confused by the grading process and lack training, they are unable to provide quality services. The theory argues that effective learning requires clear communication, but the SEE implementation, as revealed in this study, created a vacuum where neither teachers nor students could properly interpret the outcomes of the learning process.

5.3.2 Practical Implications

The findings of this study highlight several practical challenges in SEE implementation, including the requirement of proper teacher training, resource distribution, and transparency in GPA calculation. The absence of teachers' training has resulted in grading inconsistencies and confusion among students. Unlike in developed economies, where continuous professional development and proper training for teachers are provided, there is a lack of a proper framework for capacity-building for teachers in Nepal.

Urban school districts provide their schools with superior academic facilities, whereas remote school districts are unable to provide basic infrastructure. The research also suggests that equal resource distribution is essential to provide all of Nepal's students a standardised learning environment when it comes to academic education. Additionally, policymakers must establish and clearly outline GPA grading criteria and regulations to ensure that students obtain accurate performance assessments and to address student assessment transparency. The absence of clarity in GPA calculation has led to dissatisfaction among students and parents, particularly in cases where it lacks consistency. A standardised assessment protocol should be developed by policymakers to improve trust in the SEE assessment system and ensure greater reliability in student evaluations.

The SEE system was proposed to highlight formative assessment, concentrating on more comprehensive and equitable student-centred education. Nonetheless, its application has led to differences and contests or challenges.

The inequality between the judicial determination for education reform, as articulated by Fullan (2021), who opines on the standing of innovation, the establishment backing up innovation, and all participants involved, is a key factor conducive to the difference between the determination of law and the practical claim of that law. To narrow the gap between the law and practice at each level of government, we(means all Nepalese) will need to continue to build accountability and a culture of continuous learning within the profession.

The successful implementation of the SEE system in Nepal is hindered by practical challenges such as inadequate teacher training, unequal resource distribution, and a lack of transparency in GPA calculation.

To meet the goals of standardised assessments, there is a need for unity in capacity building across urban and rural schools; without such programs and an impartial structure, students will not attain reasonable results from these assessments. Officials must deliver sufficient funding for teachers to grow skilfully and offer equal access to educational resources; they must also offer specific and consistent grading procedures so that the weight and equity of the SEE system can be enhanced. Similarly, the next section covers overall knowledge contributions.

5.4 Knowledge Contribution

The data and findings from this study add new information about Nepal's SEE improvements by relaying the lived experiences of students and teachers as main participants and government officials as supplementary participants, showing a dual impact of the evaluation shift that has been absent or understated in prior literature. The grading shift decreases the stigma and stress related to exams, while at the same time there is a fear of complacency among students and an overall perception of unreasonableness regarding grading clarity and fairness in student development.

Empirically, the study explore shapes upon the pilot study and expands the sample size to a much larger study, offers systematic categorization of themes across all levels of stakeholders and schools, and displays how the reduction in the number of disappointments and psychological weights experienced by students are balanced with concerns regarding transparency in GPA, inequality between external and internal markers, and disparity among teachers in their preparation to administer the examinations.

Conceptually, the study recognises the unique features of Nepal's federal governance structure and social ethos and places the grade shift into these contexts; therefore, the habits in which the committee of the policy was refereed by local resources, capacity, and training disparities were simplified.

Methodologically, the research demonstrated a methodological procedure to advance an analytical background using an iterative and demanding thematic approach, which facilitated to improve the categories advanced from an phenomenological approach to a theoretical and learnt analysis, and offered practical implications for action: balancing the welfare of students with the academic rigor of the curriculum through stronger standards, the use of collection valuations, and continued qualified development of teachers.

In addition, the results of this study can be used as evidence-based recommendations for organisations involved in education reform at a national level in Nepal, including the School Sector Reform Plan (SSRP), the School Sector Development Plan (SSDP), and the National Education Sector Plan (NESP). The references can also be made to the Ministry of Education, Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) and International Donor Partners involved in supporting educational reform in Nepal including the World Bank, the British Council, and joint partners such as China, Korea, the United States, Japan, and the United Kingdom, to update and support the growth of equitable and contextually applicable and approachable education reform in Nepal.

5.7 Chapter Summary

The transition from an SLC-based assessment model in Nepal to a SEE-based format is meant to create a more inclusive and developmental assessment process that creates less anxiety for students, encourages a learning experience (not simply studying for the test) and allows students to focus on the knowledge of what they are being taught as opposed to simply trying to pass the test by memorising information. SEE has led to a student-centric learning environment where the students' potential is not confined by having lower marks in a few subjects. However, this transition has also introduced some concerns over declining academic rigour and complacency among students.

This study highlights the disparity of resources and lack of teachers' preparedness for SEE implementation, leading to confusion and inconsistent grading practices among the teachers. These have not only impacted on the reliability of GPA calculation, as it can be based on subjective judgements and there can be chances of inflation and deflation of grades; it has also led to a perception of unfairness among the students.

The rural–urban inequalities found in this study further raise matters about fairness, as schools are projected to meet the equal national assessment standards although variations in their resources and functional capacity. Similar disparities found in India and Pakistan remind that this is also a broader challenge around South Asian education systems.

The federalisation, which has been introduced for more inclusive and equitable growth across the nation, has also remained unable to provide necessary resources to rural areas due to ineffective coordination between different levels of government and being more centrally dependent.

The SEE introduced is aimed at aligning with global standards and elevating Nepal's education framework; however, its successful implementation remains a challenge. To meet global standards and the objectives set by SEE, proper implementation guidelines, clear protocols, access to digital infrastructure, transparent practices in grading and capacity development of teachers must be prioritised.

Chapter Six: Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1 Introduction

This concluding chapter brings the key conclusions of the study and reflects on the degree to which the research aims and objectives have been accomplished through replying to the four research questions. In doing so, I return to the experiences of students, teachers and government officials to reflect on what this study has discovered about the opportunities and challenges connected with the introduction and implementation of the Secondary Education Examination (SEE) grading system in Nepal. The chapter shifts beyond plainly briefing the findings by respecting their wider implications for educational practice and policy, specifically regarding resource educational inequality, teacher preparation, communication and assessment. In addition, I also reflect critically on my own positionality and recognise how my linguistic and cultural familiarity with Nepal, my previous experience of its education system, and my developing position as a researcher and teacher have influenced the research process and my interpretation of participants' experiences. As the empirical data were captured during a particular period of its development, I further consider important changes that occurred after the fieldwork, including the disruption caused by COVID-19 and subsequent political and policy developments. These later developments are not used to reinterpret participants' accounts retrospectively, but to consider whether the issues identified through the study remain relevant within Nepal's changing educational context. Finally, the chapter acknowledges the limitations of the research, presents recommendations for policy, practice and future research, and reflects on the continuing development of SEE as an educational reform.

6.2 Revisiting the Objective and Research Questions

My primary goal in conducting this study was to evaluate both the opportunities and challenges of the SEE. To do so, I developed four key research questions and revisited them based on my findings. Answering these research questions was an important part of the research process, leading to the collection, analysis, and interpretation of my data. The study provided value and meaning by examining the lived experiences of students, teachers, and officials and assessing the purpose and

effects of the SEE reform. I therefore conclude the thesis by answering all the main research questions with key conclusions, their implications, limitations, recommendations for future research, in practice and Final reflection.

6.1.1 Research Question 1: How are students and teachers experiencing SEE? What do they see as the advantages and disadvantages of this new system?

Conclusions from both the pilot and main studies show that students' and teachers' experiences of SEE are mixed. For many students, SEE reduced the psychological pressure long associated with the former School Leaving Certificate (SLC), which had been regarded as a rigid iron gate. The new approach was widely perceived as easier to pass, creating a sense of relief and reducing the fear of educational failure.

The government stated that the curriculum had not been amended; however, the absence of failing grades still triggered considerable confusion. Although there was a change in how students were assessed, practical examinations still exist today, but they are much less practical than they were under the SLC, when an external examiner was involved. The difference between what the government stated (policy) and how teachers and students experienced it (practice) indicates the level of attention and/or oversight within various educational monitoring systems in Nepal.

The introduction of letter grading further affected student and teacher experiences. Many described the education system as more inclusive and supportive than before, and their classroom experiences included greater participation and risk-taking as the emphasis on the consequences of test and assessment outcomes was reduced. However, there were also major negative impacts of this change in the educational system. As a result of the lack of clarity in defining letter grades, particularly the grading scale, students found themselves unable to accurately express differences in their own performance.

Additionally, some teachers reported concerns about discrepancies between internal student marking practices (how teachers assessed their own students) and the assessment approaches used in state evaluations (how students are evaluated by the state), resulting in differing outcomes. In addition to these other areas of concern, many teachers believed that eliminating "failing" would eliminate any motivation for students to surpass minimal expectations. Overall, SEE provided psychological

support and fostered a more supportive environment for teaching/learning whilst also learning new issues regarding fairness, comparisons and motivation.

6.1.2 Research Question 2: What are the issues and challenges in this new secondary education examination system?

The main challenges were that teachers also emphasised insufficient preparation for applying a SEE grading system. Teachers have said they received little or no professional development on the new grading system; however, they were still accountable for explaining the complexities of assessments to both their students and their students' parents. A second key problem was curriculum misalignment. Curriculum misalignment occurs when changes are made to one part of the curriculum but not to all parts. To illustrate, practical elements of subjects such as English and Nepali were presented in principle but were often not adequately resourced in practice. Because of a lack of resources or time to conduct the assessments effectively, these elements became more symbolic than meaningful in many schools.

Regarding rural school difficulties, many rural schools lacked even the most basic school infrastructure, e.g., working toilets or functional computer labs. The variation in support for student education compounded the disadvantages experienced by urban versus rural students. Not only did urban and rural students experience educational settings that differed markedly, but the degree of support all groups received in adjusting to this "new" method of learning also varied.

Another challenge was communication. Both students and teachers explained how little information they had been given about how grades were determined. Parents were often confused, which placed additional pressure on teachers to act as mediators between policy and practice. This lack of communication reveals a larger issue, as indicated by my findings: SEE was introduced at the policy level with limited support, explanation or training for those responsible for implementing it.

6.1.3 Research Question 3: To what extent are the issues identified as difficulties in SLC being resolved in SEE?

In reflecting on this question, I conclude that SEE has only partially resolved the problems associated with SLC. The most significant achievement of SEE has been to reduce the culture of fear surrounding the ‘iron gate’. Under SLC, students who failed were often forced to repeat a year if they failed in any subject, experienced

social stigma, and, in some tragic cases, resorted to self-harm. The introduction of a no-fail grading system under SEE has significantly reduced this psychological burden, although there were misunderstandings about what constituted a meaningful pass for enrolment in Year 11 after SEE. Teachers, students, and officials consistently explained how SEE had created a less distressing environment, in which students were less likely to drop out and more likely to continue their studies. Some participants even associated SEE with a reduction in student suicides, although I acknowledge that this was mentioned by only a few teachers and officials and cannot be considered a central or statistically proven outcome. Nevertheless, the reduction in failure and improved opportunities represent valuable achievements of the reform. However, SEE has not fully resolved other concerns that were challenging under SLC. Concerns about fairness, transparency, and comparability continue. While SEE reduced the stark division between pass and fail, it introduced new uncertainties that left students unsure of their actual performance and parents unsure about the value of grades. Moreover, disparities between public and private schools, and between urban and rural contexts, were not addressed. In this sense, SEE solved one problem but generated others, leaving teachers and students caught between relief from old fears and frustration at new uncertainties.

6.1.4 Research Question 4: What issues have arisen in relation to curriculum, teacher training, and assessment and student attitudes in implementing this new system?

Curriculum, training, and assessment emerged as the areas where the challenges of implementing SEE were most evident. Teachers persistently described being left without clear guidance on how to adjust their teaching to the new system. While the reform introduced more practical elements into subjects, these were rolled out without appropriate resources or preparation, leaving many schools unable to deliver them successfully. Students were highly aware of these gaps, often observing that their experiences depended heavily on the resources available in their schools. Rural students reported being at a disadvantage compared with urban students, who often had access to better infrastructure and ICT facilities.

The assessments added to students' disappointment. Relying solely on GPA as an indicator of success caused confusion; students felt it did not reflect how hard they had worked or how well they had performed, while teachers questioned its fairness

and consistency across schools. Many teachers were concerned about the no-fail policy and how it might reduce students' motivation to work hard to achieve good grades or perform better. Many teachers also considered it an improvement over the previous culture of punishment associated with the former SLC. As a result, student attitudes towards assessment under SEE were mixed. On the one hand, many students welcomed the psychological relief it brought and the sense of possibility it created. On the other hand, they remained uncertain about what their grades meant in practice and how these would be interpreted for future education or employment.

This ambiguity was particularly evident in relation to progression to Grade 11. While students understood the no-fail system, they also acknowledged that entry into selected streams such as science, commerce, or engineering still required specific grades. There was therefore an implicit tension in the reform: even though SEE formally eliminated the concept of failure, students still had to perform well to pursue their intended career paths, whether academic or otherwise. The objective of making the reform more inclusive conflicted with the competitive nature of further education, making students feel both pleased that they were not regarded as failures and apprehensive about whether they would obtain the grades necessary to pursue their intended careers. This apprehension was also one of the main concerns raised by government officials.

6.2 Key Conclusions

Overall, the answers to these four research questions provide an integrated insight into how the SEE reform has changed teacher's roles, assessment practices, and student experiences within Nepal's evolving federal education context.

Overall, SEE has achieved an important cultural shift by reducing examination-related fear and the stigma associated with failure. However, the reform has not yet achieved consistent or equitable implementation. The findings point to ongoing problems with grading transparency, teacher preparation, communication, and resource distribution, particularly between urban and rural schools. SEE was experienced as a largely top-down reform in which those responsible for implementation had limited preparation and consultation. The central conclusion of this study is therefore that changing the grading structure can improve students' experiences, but sustainable educational reform also depends on teacher capacity, contextual adaptation and equitable conditions across schools. The study therefore

stresses the significance of understanding reform through the lived experiences of those who apply and experience it. Changes since the data collection, including COVID-19 and following policy changes, further establish that SEE continues to evolve. The conclusions and recommendations of this study therefore remain related to the continuing development of evaluation policy and practice in Nepal. Having drawn together the main conclusions of the study, the final section reflects on the research journey and the continuing development of SEE.

6.3 Implications for Educational Practice in Nepal

The implications of this research extend beyond individual classrooms to inform national education policies such as the School Sector Reform Plan (SSRP), School Sector Development Plan (SSDP), and National Education Sector Plan (NESP), as well as donor-supported action plans led by the World Bank, the British Council, and partner countries including Korea, Japan, China, the United States, and the United Kingdom.

Teachers were central to employing SEE; however, they needed sufficient preparation, and this caused a gap in assessment knowledge and pedagogic attention for teachers. These gaps-initiated misunderstanding as well as conducted to a variation in practices among teachers. The outcomes suggest that the achievement of a reform effort is supported upon both the intention of the policy and the level of professional capability supported by the school to comprehend and implement the reform (Porcenaluk, 2023).

Practical components were difficult to realise where schools lacked time, facilities or trained staff, creating a gap between policy intentions and what could be achieved in practice. This gap was particularly visible between better-resourced urban schools and poorly resourced rural schools.

The urban-rural divide therefore has wider implications for equity. Applying common national expectations across schools with substantially different levels of infrastructure, teacher preparation and government support may reproduce rather than reduce existing inequalities. The findings indicate that national reform needs to recognise Nepal's varied geographical and institutional realities.

Another implication is for stakeholder participation. SEE was seen by students and teachers to be a reform that was largely decided at policy level with little opportunity to influence its implementation. Their confusion and criticism

demonstrate why ownership, clarity and shared understanding are important in educational change. This supports Fullan's (2016) argument that reform cannot be sustained through mandate alone but depends on engagement and shared meaning between those who implement it.

Finally, the study argues that education reform in Nepal needs to be contextualised and not imported from foreign systems. International models can be useful reference points, but their value depends on how well they are adapted to the cultural, institutional and resource context of Nepal. Overall, the findings suggest that teacher capacity, equitable conditions, stakeholder engagement, and local contextual sensitivity are critical to sustainable reform.

6.4 Limitations of the Study

The study was conducted in a single district, Chitwan, which is socioeconomically varied; however, this may not be representative of all students and teachers in Nepal. The pilot study consisted of two schools (one public and one private); the main study added eight student focus groups, four teacher focus groups, and two interviews with government officials in 4 schools. While this sample size yielded rich qualitative data, it remains small. Additional schools from rural, mountainous, and urban areas could have provided a national perspective and a clearer view of SEE implementation. The study findings therefore provide localised experiences and do not offer a national perspective on SEE implementation.

6.4.1 Participant Categories

The participants in this study were limited to three groups. The study included only students, teachers, and government officials ; it did not include: (1) parents; (2) school principals; (3) curriculum writers; and (4) national-level policymakers. There are several limitations to this approach. First, the omission of parents' perspective limits our understanding of how the community and family support or detract from students' experiences within the SEE system. Second, the exclusion of education board members and assessment specialists limits our ability to analyse the technological and policy-related obstacles that exist when implementing a grading reform.

6.4.2 Methodological Limitations

The research design was phenomenological, with an emphasis on lived experiences, and was therefore subjectively interpretive. While the phenomenological design

allows for a deep understanding of participants' viewpoints, it has limited capability to quantify results or establish cause-and-effect relationships. The research used thematic analysis of interview and focus group data, which I analysed and interpreted. My own biases, based on my background and previous knowledge of Nepal's educational system, inevitably influenced the interpretation of the data.

As a qualitative study based on thematic interpretation, the analysis was shaped by my engagement with participants and the research context. My familiarity with Nepal's education system may have influenced the questions I considered significant and how I interpreted participants' accounts. I therefore sought to remain close to participants' perspectives and to distinguish their experiences from my own assumptions. The broader impact of my positionality on the research process is reflected on separately in Section 6.6.4.

6.4.3 Language/Translation

Nepali was used for the interviews and focus group discussions, and the transcripts were later translated into English. Previous research has indicated that achieving perfect linguistic equivalence between the two languages is challenging. There are many expressions in Nepali that include cultural or contextual elements that do not lend themselves to direct translation. Although I tried to maintain the authenticity of the participants' voices and the integrity of the data, many nuances in the participants' responses were likely lost in translation. This may have affected the accuracy of certain quotations or the interpretation of the emotionally expressive content of participants' answers.

6.4.4 Constraints of the Environment in Data Collection

For logistical and ethical reasons, the pilot study interviews were completed via Skype using audio only. Visual interaction with participants may have limited my ability to collect non-verbal data, such as gestures, changes in tone, and emotional expressions, which can add to qualitative data. For the main study, the focus groups were held in person; however, due to environmental distractions (e.g., power outages and school schedules) and the need to elicit longer responses from some participants, especially in public schools, spontaneous responses may have been affected.

6.4.5 Temporal and Contextual Boundaries

The findings indicate students' and teachers' perceptions of the SEE system during the transition phase of its implementation, a few years after its introduction in 2016.

The findings should be seen as representative of a transitional period, rather than a mature period of the SEE framework. Subsequent revisions to teacher training, curriculum development, and regulatory assessments may either reinforce or mitigate the issues discussed in this study.

6.4.6 Limitation of the Cross-Sectional Design

As this study adopted a cross-sectional design, it captured participants' experiences at a single point in time. The study did not examine the long-term effects of the SEE grading system. It also did not examine whether the SEE system influences students' decisions about higher education and/or job opportunities or whether it contributes to developing students' long-term skills.

6.4.7 Logistical and Practical Constraints

The study was implemented with limited funding, time, and access to schools. Participant availability was restricted by school examinations, while travel between locations in Chitwan and coordination with multiple gatekeepers limited flexibility in scheduling. These practical constraints prevented the inclusion of additional schools and longer interviews. Nevertheless, the study provides detailed experiential insights into the benefits and challenges of the SEE reform and a basis for broader multi-district research in future.

6.5 Post-Fieldwork Developments and Continuing Relevance

Because the empirical data for this study were collected before the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to consider how the context of SEE has changed since the fieldwork. The pandemic disrupted schooling and assessment, while subsequent political instability and policy revisions altered the environment in which the grading system operates. These developments do not replace the participants' accounts; rather, they provide a contemporary context for assessing the continuing relevance of the issues they raised, particularly concerns about equity, communication, teacher preparedness and the capacity of schools to implement reform. The following section therefore considers COVID-19, subsequent political

developments and changes to SEE policy before linking these developments back to the study's recommendations.

Year/Period	Key Developments
Mar-20	Government of Nepal announced nationwide lockdown. SEE examination cancelled (*The Kathmandu Post*, 2020).
2020 (BS 2077)	SEE results calculated based on internal school assessments for the first time (*The Kathmandu Post*, 2020).
April – August 2021	Second wave of Covid 19. Schools closed again; SEE exam postponed for the second consecutive year. Internal school assessment applied again *(The Kathmandu Post, 2021)*.
Nov 2020-Feb 2021	Schools partially reopen in accordance with the guidelines of the School Operation Framework 2020. However, most rural schools remain closed for nearly a full academic year(Government of Nepal, 2020; UNICEF, 2021).
2021 (BS 2078)	Major revision to SEE grading system. 'E' grade abolished and replaced with 'NG' (Not Graded). Grading system was extended from Grade 10 to Grades 1–12 (Government of Nepal, 2021).
Jan- Feb 2022	During the third wave of COVID-19, schools were closed for a month, and the SEE examination resumed with health protocols (*The Kathmandu Post*, 2022).
September -23	School Education Bill introduced to Parliament, first attempt to replace the Education Act 1971 (*The Kathmandu Post*, 2023).
April-2025	Nationwide teachers' strike shuts schools across Nepal. Education Minister Bidya Bhattarai resigns amid political pressure. No progress on bill (*The Kathmandu Post*, 2025).

September -2025	Gen Z-led protests result in resignation of Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli. Interim government formed. Major political uncertainty in the education sector (Reuters, 2025).
April-2026	The government plans to establish autism model schools across all seven provinces and has formed a technical committee to develop the operational framework (Kantipur, 2026).
July -2026	The Government of Nepal announced the end of student unions affiliated with political parties, and the Supreme Court subsequently stayed the decision's implementation. (Kaini,2026).

Table 11: Key Developments in Nepal's SEE System and Education Policy, 2020–2026

6.6.1 Impact of COVID-19 on the Nepalese SEE System

The COVID-19 pandemic was one of the most disruptive events in the history of Nepal's national examination system since the School Leaving Certificate began. When the government announced a national-level lockdown on 24 March 2020, the education system was completely disrupted. UNICEF subsequently reported that prolonged closures affected all 34,816 schools and almost 8.3 million school-aged children in Nepal (UNICEF Nepal, 2023). In the case of SEE, in the academic year 2020, 482,786 students were registered for the SEE examination; however, no students could attend the physical examination (PMC, 2022). This was the first time in Nepal's education history that the national secondary examination was cancelled. According to Dawadi et al. (2020), the COVID-19 school closures in Nepal were inadequate, fragmented, and uncoordinated in their early response, with limited preparedness to cope with a pandemic of this scale.

To continue the academic year, the government had to take the decision to publish results entirely based on internal school assessments. This decision raised questions about the credibility of the grading system. In the SEE grading system, where concerns about inconsistency and unfairness already existed, the change to school-based assessment amplified these concerns considerably among the public. Private schools, which could be considered better equipped in terms of resources and better positioned to conduct proper internal assessment compared with public schools,

may have further highlighted the existing inequalities between private and public schools. Furthermore, as Dawadi et al. (2020) noted, the sudden shift to internal assessment negatively affected students' learning outcomes; a two-year period without centralised external assessment was likely to have created greater confusion and disengagement.

One of the clearest effects of COVID-19 was the exposure of the digital divide between urban and rural areas and between more and less advantaged students. UNICEF reported that prolonged closures affected all 34,816 schools and almost 8.3 million school-aged children in Nepal, while remote learning remained inaccessible to many children (UNICEF Nepal, 2020; UNICEF Nepal, 2023; Adhikari et.al.,2023). This is directly relevant to the inequalities identified in my fieldwork: students in rural and under-resourced schools were already disadvantaged in access to infrastructure, teachers and learning materials, and the pandemic made the consequences of those differences more visible. The post-COVID evidence therefore reinforces, rather than weakens, the continuing relevance of the study's emphasis on equitable resources and implementation capacity.

6.6.2 Political Instability and Its Impact on Educational Reform

Political instability has continued to affect the environment in which education reform is implemented in Nepal. The School Education Bill, which was projected in 2023, is still pending before Parliament. Due to gaps in progressing the bill, there were extensive teacher protests across Nepal in 2025. Teachers participating in the protests called on Parliament to pass the bill and heard their established concerns as teachers and professionals. Education Minister Bidya Bhattarai resigned in April 2025 due to conflicts with other participants over the bill (The Kathmandu Post, 2025). This political context illustrates how difficult it can be to sustain long-term education reform efforts if legislation, implementation responsibilities, and stakeholder expectations continue to evolve.

These complexities will have significant impacts upon the structure of the SEE grading system. As stated earlier one of the major conclusions of this study is that both effective and appropriate implementation of the SEE was negatively impacted by a lack of clarity in policy direction and inadequate support provided to both teachers and students. Additionally, political instability has created uncertainty regarding whether the SEE reform process is sustainable in the long

run. Since the initiation of this research numerous Nepalese Governments and Education Ministers have come and gone along with a multitude of reform initiatives. Therefore, the long-term trajectory of the SEE grading system remains uncertain.

6.6.3 Policy Changes to the SEE Grading System

Several important changes to the SEE grading system have conducted place since the accomplishment of this study. In 2021, the National Examinations Board reworked its letter-grade structure through a new set of policies. The Grade E, previously the indicator of low accomplishment within the grading system, was replaced by "NG" (Not Graded) demonstrating that a student did not attain a passing grade (35%) in any individual subject (Grokipedia, 2026).

As section of the new grading system grades are now assigned using eight different levels: A+ , A , B+ , B , C+ , C , D , and NG. Students who earn an NG in no more than two subjects may choose to participate in a retake grade improvement exam without having to pay a full school year.

However, if students receive NG in more than two subjects, they are required to retake the full set of examinations in the following year's regular cycle (Gurubaa, 2024). The replacement of the 'E' grade with 'NG' indicates the government's attempt to reduce the psychological pressure associated with terminology related to failure among students; however, the impact of this change on students' and teachers' experiences could be an area for future research.

Another major policy change was the extension of the letter-grading system from Grade 1 to Grade 12. The decision was made in 2021 with the fundamental philosophical commitment to implement grading as a primary mode of educational assessment across the entire school system. One finding of my study was that students' understanding of the GPA system was very limited; only one public-school student in this study was able to explain the meaning of GPA. This raises a serious question about whether sufficient preparation and investment had been made in educating students and parents about the grading system before its extension to the entire school system.

Another policy change to the SEE assessment framework has been the introduction of a 75:25 evaluation ratio for most compulsory subjects, whereby 75 marks are allocated to the written theoretical examination and 25 marks to internal practical

assessments. This represents a departure from earlier practice, in which subjects such as Social Studies and English had no practical component. This shift also raises a question: if 25% of a SEE student's grade is determined by internal school assessment, what impact will this have on the quality of education for students in remote schools?

The overall evidence of the ongoing reform suggests that SEE is evolving as a policy initiative rather than being fully established (Government of Nepal, Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2022; UNESCO, 2026). Inequality in access and implementation was clearly demonstrated through the impact of COVID-19 on SEE (UNICEF, 2020), followed by the series of policy amendments and political debates concerning SEE (Government of Nepal, Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2022; Federal Parliament Secretariat, 2023). Therefore, although student and teacher perceptions of equity in the current context of this research and may be less severe, they can reinforce many of the recommendations from this chapter until it is fully established. If new versions of SEE are to be equitably introduced with consistent levels of support across all regions, then it will be critical to provide continuous professional development opportunities for all teachers, invest equally into every school in each region (with particular emphasis upon those in rural areas), create better communication mechanisms and engage with stakeholders.

6.7 Positionality and How It Influences the Research Process

As a Nepali speaker, I was able to conduct interviews and focus groups on participants' language, which helped build rapport and allowed students and teachers to describe their experiences in a familiar language. That linguistic and cultural familiarity was a strength, but it also required critical reflection. As an insider familiar with Nepal's education system, I could not assume that participants understood the issues the way I did, especially when interviewing government officials. Therefore, I used open-ended questions and follow-up prompts to encourage participants to describe their own meanings rather than rely on what I assumed was shared knowledge.

I was conscious during the analysis of how my own educational experiences in Nepal could influence how I interpreted participants' accounts.

My later experience as a lecturer in UK higher education also gave me a different perspective on teaching and assessment. This insider-outsider position helped me recognise issues that might otherwise have been overlooked, while also requiring me to question my assumptions and remain close to participants' accounts. Positionality therefore shaped both the strengths and limitations of the knowledge produced in this study.

6.7 Recommendations

In reflecting on the limitations of my study and the evidence collected, I recognise areas that require further research, as well as immediate actions that could strengthen educational practices in Nepal. My findings documented both the possibilities afforded by SEE reform and the ongoing challenges of curriculum delivery, grading, assessment, and teacher preparation. It is possible to distinguish between two broad sets of recommendations based on these issues: those focused on further research and those aimed at improving educational practices and policies.

6.7.1 Recommendations for Qualitative Research in Nepal

This study also demonstrates the value of qualitative research for understanding educational reform in Nepal. Large-scale numerical data can show patterns of examination performance, but they cannot by themselves explain how students experience reform or how teachers understand and adapt to policy change. By combining semi-structured interviews and focus groups across students, teachers and government officials, this study made these lived experiences visible and strengthened the credibility of the findings through triangulation. Future educational research in Nepal should therefore continue to use qualitative and more mixed-method approaches where understanding experience, large data from more districts, the meaning of SEE to them and implementation are important.

6.7.1.1 For Future Research

From a research perspective, it would be useful to repeat studies like mine in a broader range of geographical and economic contexts in Nepal. By extending this kind of study to remote areas of Nepal, where educational opportunities differ markedly from those in urban centres such as Kathmandu, it would be valuable to determine whether the opportunities and challenges I identified exist nationally or differ regionally. In addition, comparative studies would help bring into focus how

variation in resource availability, teacher preparedness, and parents' expectations across contexts influences SEE students' experiences.

Several students and teachers framed parental expectations as a source of stress or pressure, even with a new no-fail grading policy in place, and there appeared to be misconceptions about meaningful passing grades for Grade 11. This was potentially misleading for Grade 11 preparation. Investigating parents' understanding of SEE, their hopes and concerns, and how they encouraged or limited their children's learning would provide a vital dimension to the discussion of educational reform.

Furthermore, longitudinal studies are significant for understanding SEE's long-term effects on students' educational and career trajectories. At the time of my fieldwork, SEE was still comparatively new, and any long-term impacts could only be speculated about by the participants. The students did not know how those grades would be viewed when applying to higher education and the workforce, while teachers worried that the GPA system was unclear and required greater understanding. Tracking SEE graduates over time would provide valuable insight into whether SEE expands educational mobility, reduces inequity or prepares young people for their future pathways. Furthermore, future research should employ a variety of methods combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. While my qualitative research provided detail and depth on lived experience, large-scale survey research could reflect a wider range of regional and demographic perceptions.

A mixed-methods, longitudinal study could help future researchers understand both the immediate emotional relief reported by many students and the long-term structural differences that students continue to navigate (Porcenaluk, 2023; Wang, Li and Yan, 2023).

At the time this study was conducted, ethical approval from a national regulatory body in Nepal was not mandatory for educational research, although such approval was, and continues to be, mandatory for health-related research through the Nepal Health Research Council (NHRC). Therefore, ethical approval for this study was obtained from Liverpool John Moores University, and consent to conduct the research was granted by the relevant educational institutions and participating schools in Nepal. Given the increasing emphasis on research governance and ethical oversight, it is recommended that Nepal consider establishing a formal ethical review and approval system for educational research, like the existing NHRC

framework for health research, to promote consistency, transparency, and the protection of research participants.

6.7.1.2 Practice

For practice, my data reveal an immediate need for extensive and ongoing professional development for teachers. Teachers in my study commonly stated that they were unable to efficiently implement the new grading system because of absence of training and support from the school district on how to bring curriculum that align with prospects for SEE assessment tools (tualaulelei, 2022). Professional development needs to move away from short workshops on specific aspects of reform towards implanted continuous training that will support teachers with a deep understanding of reform and actual practice of reform.

Thus, my recommendations begin with a call for educational policymakers to develop structured training programmes that introduce teachers to new reforms and provide ongoing support through mentoring, peer collaboration, and refresher workshops. The need for training is also critical for the proper use of grading rubrics, so that teachers, students, and parents understand what grades signify in terms of achievement and progression (Riordan, Klein and Gaynor, 2019).

A second recommendation concerns resource allocation and equity. My study also documented how rural schools were underserved in their ability to deliver the new curricular components, especially the practical aspects of the curriculum that required laboratories, libraries, or computer access. Urban schools were more likely to respond effectively to such changes. Therefore, to enhance fairness and reduce inequity, focused investment in rural schools is critical. This could take to the extent of providing digital infrastructure, enhanced classroom resources, and possibly incentivising recruiting qualified teachers to the rural areas of the country. Failing to prepare these funds will likely conduct to a support of educational inequities and not a closing of those gaps. Finally, it is recommended that consideration should be given to establishing an advisory body composed of representatives from all major groups concerned.

Students and teachers expressed confusion about the purpose of the grade, its interpretation, and its application, and many highlighted that government officials had failed to clearly communicate how SEE was to be implemented. Therefore, communication about SEE reforms needs to improve so that policies are explained

clearly and transparently to stakeholders. To do this well, there is a need for official circulars, workshops, school visits, and a variety of informational opportunities for teachers, students, and parents. Without clear communication, meaningful reform cannot be realised if those most directly affected by the reform are left uncertain about its purpose and implications (Baker, 2019).

Finally, my last recommendation is that future reforms should learn from the implementation of SEE by engaging participatory approaches to policy development. My findings suggest that modifications to learning policy implemented through a top-down approach, without evident opportunities for discussion and preparation for teachers, are questionable in achieving the intended goals. The government has the opportunity to develop policies that foster greater ownership and reduce conflict by involving teachers, students, and parents in the design, piloting, and review of reforms, even when plans remain government-led (Baker, 2019).

In conclusion, I reiterate that my recommendations are not fanciful ideals but have emerged from the lived experiences of my participants. Students, teachers, and officials recognised the cultural importance of SEE in reducing fear and providing opportunities, but also expressed disappointment stemming from confusion, inequities, and lack of support. Targeted research, teacher development, equitable resource allocation, and better communication will be the foundation for ensuring that SEE, or any future reform, realises its intended cultural and educational goals.

6.8 Final Reflection

Thus, SEE has transformed the old practices of assessments culture in Nepal by reducing significantly of the fear and stigma related with failure, whilst also indicating continuing opposes in communication, teacher preparation, and educational parity. Within the experiences of students, teachers and government officials, this study demonstrates that educational reform requires much to be identified not only as policy but also across the existed experiences of those clearly involved in ground. The post-data collection developments, with COVID-19 and later policy changes, further demonstrate the continuing value of acceptable resources, teacher training and significant stakeholder engagement.

Reflecting on this exploration, I acknowledge that my own position and understanding grew alongside the study. My closeness with Nepal and its education system facilitated me to understand the context, whereas undergone me to stay aware of my assumptions and preserve participants' experiences central to my understanding. In detailing these experiences, this study contributes to understanding Nepal's assessment reform at a particular point in its expansion. However, SEE and the comprehensive educational context continue to evolve. This reminds me that educational reform, like research itself, is never totally complete. Although this thesis concludes my study of SEE, the questions it has raised remain open to further research, reflection and changes.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Participant information sheet for skype interviews for pilot study

Participant information sheet for students aged 14-16 for skype interviews LJMU'S Research Ethics Committee Approval Reference:18/EDN/015

Please read this and keep this information sheet and a question sheet for yourself. Individual Skype Interviews with students aged 14-16 years

School/ Faculty: Faculty of Education

Title of Project: An exploration of students' and teachers' experiences on a new grading system in Secondary Education Examinations (SEE) in Chitwan District of Nepal.

Name and contact details of the Researcher: Rhymes Shakti, Liverpool John Moores University, Immarsh Campus, Facultyof Education, L17 6BD. Email; (researcher's email address)

Name of and contact details of the Investigators (Supervisors):

- Lead supervisor , Liverpool John Moores University, Faculty of Education, Health and Community, IM Marsh, Barkhill Road, Aigburth, Liverpool L17 6BD.
- Co-supervisor 1, Liverpool John Moores University, Faculty of Education, Health and Community, IM Marsh, Barkhill Road, Aigburth, Liverpool L17 6BD
- Co-supervisor 2, Facultyof Education, Health and Community, IM Marsh, Barkhill Road, Aigburth, Liverpool L17 6BD

You are being invited to participate in the first phase of this study which is a Skype interview. Before you decide whether to take part it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it involves. Please take the time to carefully read the following information. If there is anything that is unclear, or you would like more information, please email me at; (Researcher email address) . Take time to decide if you want to take part or not.

1. What is the purpose of the study?

This study aims to explore the opportunities and challenges of SEE through students' and teachers' experiences of the current examination system. No studies have yet been carried out on the experience of SEE and the findings of this study will be shared with key stakeholders such as, teachers, educational leaders and students. This will enable them to understand the experiences of those students studying for and undertaking the examinations.

2. Why have I been invited to participate? You have been invited because you:

- are in the age group of 14-16 years
- have undertaken SEE this year.

Your parent/hostel warden has given permission for me to contact you and invite you to participate in the study.

3. Do I have to take part?

No, it is up to you to decide whether to take part or not. If you decide to you will be interviewed about your views on the SEE system by skype. A copy of the questions the researcher will ask are attached to this sheet. Your consent will be required before the interview takes place.

4. What will happen to me if I take part?

If you decide to take part in the study, you will be engaged in a Skype interview which will take approximately 1 hour of your time and will take place at your school. The interview questions and conversation will be entertained in Nepali/ English language whichever language you feel comfortable with. Your responses will remain anonymous.

5. Will I be recorded and how will the recorded media be used?

The skype interview will be audio recorded on a password protected audio recording device and as soon as possible, the recording will be transferred to secure storage and deleted from the recording device.

The audio recordings of your activities made during this study will be used only for analysis and for illustration in conference presentations and lectures. The recordings will be anonymous. No other use will be made of them without your written permission, and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recordings.

6. What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

You will have seen the questions for the interview, it is unlikely you will become distressed during the skype interview. However, I will give careful attention to your facial and verbal expression and if I need to, stop the interview. If you become upset I will contact the Head teacher, if necessary.

7. What are the possible benefits of taking part?

There will be no direct benefits to you for taking part in the study, but it is hoped that this study will lead to provide practical recommendation on effective implementation of SEE. Your participation will help to understand the implications of the Secondary Education Examination and influence teachers' and students' future experiences.

8.What will happen to the data provided and how will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

The information you will provide as part of the study is the research study data. Any research study data from which you can be identified (e.g. from identifiers such as your name, date of birth, audio recording etc.), is known as personal data.

Personal data does not include data that cannot be identified to an individual (e.g. data collected anonymously or where identifiers have been removed).

This project will not contain any personal data. However, in the process of this research project if we (the researcher and the research team) come across any personal data, it will be

stored confidentially for 5 years after the study has finished or as long as it is necessary to verify and defend, when required, the process and outcomes of research. The time may be several years.

Personal data will be only accessible to the researcher and the research team.

We will not tell anyone that you have taken part in this project, although there is of course a possibility that another member of Skype interview might recognise you. We will also not name you in any of our reports or publications. In addition, all participants in the Skype interview will be asked to respect the confidentiality of their fellow participants.

You will not be identifiable in any ensuing reports or publications.

Your responses will be allocated as unique identifier number which will be known to the researcher and the research team only. This will be linked to a pseudonym.

We will use pseudonyms in transcripts and reports to help protect the identity of individuals and organisations unless you tell us that you would like to be attributed to information/direct quote etc.

8. Limits to confidentiality

Please note that confidentiality may not be guaranteed; for example, due to the limited size of the participant sample, the position of the participant or information included in reports, participants might be indirectly identifiable in transcripts and reports. I will work with the participant to minimise and manage the potential for indirect identification of participants. This will be promoted by ensuring the school will be kept anonymous.

I will keep confidential anything I learn or observe however I have a professional obligation to inform relevant agencies in certain exceptional circumstances, this is where you or others may be at significant risk of harm, in which case I may need to report this to an appropriate authority. This would usually be discussed with you first. Examples of those exceptional circumstances when confidential information may have to be disclosed are if:

- I believe you are at serious risk of harm, either from yourself or others
- I suspect a child may be at risk of harm
- You pose a serious risk of harm to, or threaten or abuse others
- As a statutory requirement e.g. reporting certain infectious diseases
- Under a court order requiring the University to divulge information
- I am passed information relating to an act of terrorism

7. What will happen to the results of the research project?

I intend to complete a PhD thesis to satisfy the requirements of a degree programme and publish the results in journal articles

8. Who is organising and funding/commissioning the study?

This study is supervised by Liverpool John Moores University in UK and self-funded.

12.Who has reviewed this study?

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the Liverpool John Moores University Research Ethics Committee (Reference number: 18/EDN/015).

15. What if something goes wrong?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, please contact me and I will do my best to answer your query. I should acknowledge your concern within 7 working days and give you an indication of how I intend to deal with it. If you wish to make a complaint, please contact the chair of the Liverpool John Moores University Research Ethics Committee (researchethics@ljmu.ac.uk) and your communication will be re-directed to an independent person as appropriate.

16. Data Protection Notice

The data controller for this study will be Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU). The LJMU Data Protection Office provides oversight of LJMU activities involving the processing of personal data and can be contacted at secretariat@ljmu.ac.uk. This means that we are responsible for looking after your information and using it properly. LJMU's Data Protection Officer can also be contacted at secretariat@ljmu.ac.uk. The University will process your personal data for the purpose of research. Research is a task that we perform in the public interest.

Your rights to access change or move your information are limited, as we need to manage your information in specific ways for the research to be dependable and accurate. If you withdraw from the study, we will keep the information about you that we have already obtained.

You can find out more about how we use your information by contacting secretariat@ljmu.ac.uk.

If you are concerned about how your personal data is being processed, please contact LJMU in the first instance at secretariat@ljmu.ac.uk. If you remain unsatisfied, you may wish to contact the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO). Contact details, and details of data subject rights, are available on the ICO website at: https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/data-protection-reform/overview-of-the-gdpr/individuals-rights/

16.Contact for further information

If you have any concerns regarding your involvement in this research, please discuss these with me in the first instance. If you wish to make a complaint, please contact researchethics@ljmu.ac.uk and your communication will be re-directed to an independent person as appropriate.

Thank you for reading this information sheet and for considering taking part in this study.

Note: A copy of the participant information sheet should be retained by the participant with a copy of the signed consent form.

Appendix B: Participant information sheet for Gatekeeper for Pilot study

Participant information sheet for students aged 14-16 for skype interviews LJMU'S Research Ethics Committee Approval Reference:18/EDN/015

Please read this and keep this information sheet and a question sheet for yourself. Individual Skype Interviews with students aged 14-16 years

School/ Faculty: Faculty of Education

Title of Project: An exploration of students' and teachers' experiences on a new grading system in Secondary Education Examinations (SEE) in Chitwan District of Nepal.

Name and contact details of the Researcher :Rhymes Shakti, Liverpool John Moores University, Immarsh Campus, Faculty of Education, L17 6BD. Email; (Researcher email address)

Name of and contact details of the Investigators(Supervisors):

- Dr. Susan Kay Flowers, Liverpool John Moores University, Faculty of Education, Health and Community, IM Marsh, Barkhill Road, Aigburth, Liverpool L17 6BD.
- Dr. Andrew Kennedy, Liverpool John Moores University, Faculty of Education, Health and Community, IM Marsh, Barkhill Road, Aigburth, Liverpool L17 6BD
- Dr. Claire Hennessy, Faculty of Education, Health and Community, IM Marsh, Barkhill Road, Aigburth, Liverpool L17 6BD

You are invited to participate in the first phase of this study which is a Skype interview. Before you decide whether to take part it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it involves. Please take the time to carefully read the following information. If there is anything that is unclear, or you would like more information, please email me at; R.shakti@2017.ljmu.ac.uk. Take time to decide if you want to take part or not.

1. What is the purpose of the study ?

This study aims to explore the opportunities and challenges of SEE through students' and teachers' experiences of the current examination system. No studies have yet been carried out on the experience of SEE and the findings of this study will be shared with key stakeholders such as, teachers, educational leaders and students. This will enable them to understand the experiences of those students studying for and undertaking the examinations.

2. Why have I been invited to participate ? You have been invited because you:

- are in the age group of 14-16 years.
- have undertaken SEE this year.

Your parent/hostel warden has given permission for me to contact you and invite you to participate in the study.

2. Do I have to take part?

No, it is up to you to decide whether to take part or not. If you decide to you will be interviewed about your views on the SEE system by skype. A copy of the questions the researcher will ask are attached to this sheet. Your consent will be required before the interview takes place.

3. What will happen to me if I take part?

If you decide to take part in the study, you will be engaged in a Skype interview which will take approximately 1 hour of your time and will take place at your school. The interview questions and conversation will be entertained in Nepali/ English language whichever language you feel comfortable with. Your responses will remain anonymous.

4. Will I be recorded and how will the recorded media be used?

The skype interview will be audio recorded on a password protected audio recording device and as soon as possible, the recording will be transferred to secure storage and deleted from the recording device.

The audio recordings of your activities made during this study will be used only for analysis and for illustration in conference presentations and lectures. The recordings will be anonymous. No other use will be made of them without your written permission, and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recordings.

5. What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

You will have seen the questions for the interview; it is unlikely you will become distressed during the skype interview. However, I will give careful attention to your facial and verbal expression and if I need to, stop the interview. If you become upset, I will contact the Head teacher, if necessary.

6. What are the possible benefits of taking part?

There will be no direct benefits to you for taking part in the study, but it is hoped that this study will lead to provide practical recommendation on effective implementation of SEE. Your participation will help to understand the implications of the Secondary Education Examination and influence teachers' and students' future experiences.

8.What will happen to the data provided and how will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

The information you will provide as part of the study is the research study data. Any research study data from which you can be identified (e.g. from identifiers such as your name, date of birth, audio recording etc.), is known as personal data.

Personal data does not include data that cannot be identified to an individual (e.g. data collected anonymously or where identifiers have been removed).

This project will not contain any personal data. However, in the process of this research project if we (the researcher and the research team) come across any personal data, it will be stored confidentially for 5 years after the study has finished or as long as it is necessary

to verify and defend, when required, the process and outcomes of research. The period may be a few years.

Personal data will be only accessible to the researcher and the research team.

We will not tell anyone that you have taken part in this project, although there is of course a possibility that another member of Skype interview might recognise you. We will also not name you in any of our reports or publications. In addition, all participants in the Skype interview will be asked to respect the confidentiality of their fellow participants.

You will not be identifiable in any ensuing reports or publications.

Your responses will be allocated as unique identifier number which will be known to the researcher and the research team only. This will be linked to a pseudonym.

We will use pseudonyms in transcripts and reports to help protect the identity of individuals and organisations unless you tell us that you would like to be attributed to information/direct quote etc.

7. Limits to confidentiality

Please note that confidentiality may not be guaranteed, for example, due to the limited size of the participant sample, the position of the participant or information.

included in reports, participants might be indirectly identifiable in transcripts and reports. I will work with the participant to minimise and manage the potential for indirect identification of participants. This will be promoted by ensuring the school will be kept anonymous.

I will keep confidential anything I learn or observe however I have a professional obligation to inform relevant agencies in certain exceptional circumstances, this is where you or others may be at significant risk of harm, in which case I may need to report this to an appropriate authority. This would usually be discussed with you first. Examples of those exceptional circumstances when confidential information may have to be disclosed are if:

- I believe you are at serious risk of harm, either from yourself or others
- I suspect a child may be at risk of harm.
- You pose a serious risk of harm to or threaten or abuse others.
- As a statutory requirement e.g. reporting certain infectious diseases
- Under a court order requiring the University to divulge information
- I am passed information relating to an act of terrorism.

7. What will happen to the results of the research project?

I intend to complete a PhD thesis to satisfy the requirements of a degree programme and publish the results in journal articles.

8. Who is organising and funding/commissioning the study?

This study is supervised by Liverpool John Moores University in UK and self-funded.

12. Who has reviewed this study?

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the Liverpool John Moores University Research Ethics Committee (Reference number: 18/EDN/015).

15. What if something goes wrong?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, please contact me and I will do my best to answer your query. I should acknowledge your concern within 7 working days and give you an indication of how I intend to deal with it. If you wish to make a complaint, please contact the chair of the Liverpool John Moores University Research Ethics Committee (researchethics@ljmu.ac.uk) and your communication will be re-directed to an independent person as appropriate.

16. Data Protection Notice

The data controller for this study will be Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU). The LJMU Data Protection Office provides oversight of LJMU activities involving the processing of personal data and can be contacted at secretariat@ljmu.ac.uk. This means that we are responsible for looking after your information and using it properly. LJMU's Data Protection Officer can also be contacted at secretariat@ljmu.ac.uk. The University will process your personal data for the purpose of research. Research is a task that we perform in the public interest.

Your rights to access change or move your information are limited, as we need to manage your information in specific ways for the research to be reliable and accurate. If you withdraw from the study, we will keep the information about you that we have already obtained.

You can find out more about how we use your information by contacting secretariat@ljmu.ac.uk.

If you are concerned about how your personal data is being processed, please contact LJMU in the first instance at secretariat@ljmu.ac.uk. If you remain unsatisfied, you may wish to contact the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO). Contact details, and details of data subject rights, are available on the ICO website at: https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/data-protection-reform/overview-of-the-gdpr/individuals-rights/

17.0 Contact for further information

If you have any concerns regarding your involvement in this research, please discuss these with me in the first instance. If you wish to make a complaint, please contact researchethics@ljmu.ac.uk and your communication will be re-directed to an independent person as appropriate.

Thank you for reading this information sheet and for considering taking part in this study.

Note: A copy of the participant information sheet should be retained by the participant with a copy of the signed consent form

Appendix C: Participant information sheet for parent who children are aged 16 for Pilot study

Participant information sheet for students aged 14-16 for skype interviews LJMU'S Research Ethics Committee Approval Reference:18/EDN/015

Please read this and keep this information sheet and a question sheet for yourself. Individual Skype Interviews with students aged 14-16 years

School/ Faculty: Faculty of Education

Title of Project: An exploration of students' and teachers' experiences on a new grading system in Secondary Education Examinations (SEE) in Chitwan District of Nepal.

Name and contact details of the Researcher :Rhymes Shakti, Liverpool John Moores University, Immarsh Campus, Faculty of Education, L17 6BD. Email; (Researcher email address)

Name of and contact details of the Investigators(Supervisors):

- Dr. Susan Kay Flowers, Liverpool John Moores University, Faculty of Education, Health and Community, IM Marsh, Barkhill Road, Aigburth, Liverpool L17 6BD.
- Dr. Andrew Kennedy, Liverpool John Moores University, Faculty of Education, Health and Community, IM Marsh, Barkhill Road, Aigburth, Liverpool L17 6BD
- Dr. Claire Hennessy, Faculty of Education, Health and Community, IM Marsh, Barkhill Road, Aigburth, Liverpool L17 6BD

You are being invited to participate in the first phase of this study which is a Skype interview. Before you decide whether to take part it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it involves. Please take the time to carefully read the following information. If there is anything that is unclear, or you would like more information, please email me at; R.shakti@2017.ljmu.ac.uk. Take time to decide if you want to take part or not.

1. What is the purpose of the study ?

This study aims to explore the opportunities and challenges of SEE through students' and teachers' experiences of the current examination system. No studies have yet been carried out on the experience of SEE and the findings of this study will be shared with key stakeholders such as, teachers, educational leaders and students. This will enable them to understand the experiences of those students studying for and undertaking the examinations.

2. Why have I been invited to participate ? You have been invited because you:

- are in the age group of 14-16 years
- have undertaken SEE this year.

Your parent/hostel warden has given permission for me to contact you and invite you to participate in the study.

3. Do I have to take part?

No, it is up to you to decide whether to take part or not. If you decide to you will be interviewed about your views on the SEE system by skype. A copy of the questions the researcher will ask are attached to this sheet. Your consent will be required before the interview takes place.

4. What will happen to me if I take part?

If you decide to take part in the study, you will be engaged in a Skype interview which will take approximately 1 hour of your time and will take place at your school. The interview questions and conversation will be entertained in Nepali/ English language whichever language you feel comfortable with. Your responses will remain anonymous.

5. Will I be recorded and how will the recorded media be used?

The skype interview will be audio recorded on a password protected audio recording device and as soon as possible, the recording will be transferred to secure storage and deleted from the recording device.

The audio recordings of your activities made during this study will be used only for analysis and for illustration in conference presentations and lectures. The recordings will be anonymous. No other use will be made of them without your written permission, and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recordings.

6. What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

You will have seen the questions for the interview; it is unlikely you will become distressed during the skype interview. However, I will give careful attention to your facial and verbal expression and if I need to, stop the interview. If you become upset, I will contact the Head teacher, if necessary.

7. What are the possible benefits of taking part?

There will be no direct benefits to you for taking part in the study, but it is hoped that this study will lead to provide practical recommendation on effective implementation of SEE. Your participation will help to understand the implications of the Secondary Education Examination and influence teachers' and students' future experiences.

8. What will happen to the data provided and how will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

The information you will provide as part of the study is the research study data. Any research study data from which you can be identified (e.g. from identifiers such as your name, date of birth, audio recording etc.), is known as personal data.

Personal data does not include data that cannot be identified to an individual (e.g. data collected anonymously or where identifiers have been removed).

This project will not contain any personal data. However, in the process of this research project if we (the researcher and the research team) come across any personal data, it will be stored confidentially for 5 years after the study has finished or as long as it is necessary to verify and defend, when required, the process and outcomes of research. The time may be

several years. Personal data will be only accessible to the researcher and the research team. We will not tell anyone that you have taken part in this project, although there is of course a possibility that another member of Skype interview might recognise you. We will also not name you in any of our reports or publications. In addition, all participants in the Skype interview will be asked to respect the confidentiality of their fellow participants. You will not be identifiable in any ensuing reports or publications. Your responses will be allocated as unique identifier number which will be known to the researcher and the research team only. This will be linked to a pseudonym. We will use pseudonyms in transcripts and reports to help protect the identity of individuals and organisations unless you tell us that you would like to be attributed to information/direct quote etc.

9. Limits to confidentiality

Please note that confidentiality may not be guaranteed; for example, due to the limited size of the participant sample, the position of the participant or information included in reports, participants might be indirectly identifiable in transcripts and reports. I will work with the participant to minimise and manage the potential for indirect identification of participants. This will be promoted by ensuring the school will be kept anonymous.

I will keep confidential anything I learn or observe however I have a professional obligation to inform relevant agencies in certain exceptional circumstances, this is where you or others may be at significant risk of harm, in which case I may need to report this to an appropriate authority. This would usually be discussed with you first. Examples of those exceptional circumstances when confidential information may have to be disclosed are if:

- I believe you are at serious risk of harm, either from yourself or others
- I suspect a child may be at risk of harm
- You pose a serious risk of harm to, or threaten or abuse others
- As a statutory requirement e.g. reporting certain infectious diseases
- Under a court order requiring the University to divulge information
- I am passed information relating to an act of terrorism

7. What will happen to the results of the research project?

I intend to complete a PhD thesis to satisfy the requirements of a degree programme and publish the results in journal articles

8. Who is organising and funding/commissioning the study?

This study is supervised by Liverpool John Moores University in UK and self-funded.

12. Who has reviewed this study?

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the Liverpool John Moores University Research Ethics Committee (Reference number: 18/EDN/015).

15. What if something goes wrong?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, please contact me and I will do my best to answer your query. I should acknowledge your concern within 7 working days and give you an indication of how I intend to deal with it. If you wish to make a complaint,

please contact the chair of the Liverpool John Moores University Research Ethics Committee (researchethics@ljmu.ac.uk) and your communication will be re-directed to an independent person as appropriate.

16. Data Protection Notice

The data controller for this study will be Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU). The LJMU Data Protection Office provides oversight of LJMU activities involving the processing of personal data and can be contacted at secretariat@ljmu.ac.uk. This means that we are responsible for looking after your information and using it properly. LJMU's Data Protection Officer can also be contacted at secretariat@ljmu.ac.uk. The University to process your personal data for the purpose of research. Research is a task that we perform in public interest.

Your rights to access change or move your information are limited, as we need to manage your information in specific ways for the research to be reliable and accurate. If you withdraw from the study, we will keep the information about you that we have already obtained.

You can find out more about how we use your information by contacting secretariat@ljmu.ac.uk.

If you are concerned about how your personal data is being processed, please contact LJMU in the first instance at secretariat@ljmu.ac.uk. If you remain unsatisfied, you may wish to contact the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO). Contact details, and details of data subject rights, are available on the ICO website at: https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/data-protection-reform/overview-of-the-gdpr/individuals-rights/

16.Contact for further information

If you have any concerns regarding your involvement in this research, please discuss these with me in the first instance. If you wish to make a complaint, please contact researchethics@ljmu.ac.uk and your communication will be re-directed to an independent person as appropriate.

Thank you for reading this information sheet and for considering taking part in this study.

Note: A copy of the participant information sheet should be retained by the participant with a copy of the signed consent form.

Appendix D: Participant Information sheet for Focus group Discussion for students

Please read this and keep this information sheet and a question sheet for yourself

Education who has played a role in the S.E.E examination. Your involvement is sought in the targeted group for this study.

Do I have to take part?

No, it is up to you to decide whether to take part or not. If you decide to you will be interviewed about your views on the SEE system by skype. A copy of the questions the

School/ Faculty: Faculty of Education

LJMU'S Research Ethics Committee Approval Reference:18/EDN/015

Title of Project: An exploration of students' and teachers' experiences on a new grading system in Secondary Education Examinations (SEE) in Chitwan District of Nepal.

Name and contact details of the Researcher :Rhymes Shakti, Liverpool John Moores University, Immarsh Campus, Faculty of Education, L17 6BD. Email; (Researcher email address)

Name of and contact details of the Investigators(Supervisors):

- Lead supervisor , Liverpool John Moores University, Faculty of Education, Health and Community, IM Marsh, Barkhill Road, Aigburth, Liverpool L17 6BD.
- Co-supervisor 1, Liverpool John Moores University, Faculty of Education, Health and Community, IM Marsh, Barkhill Road, Aigburth, Liverpool L17 6BD
- Co-supervisor 2, Faculty of Education, Health and Community, IM Marsh, Barkhill Road, Aigburth, Liverpool L17 6BD

You are being invited to participate in the first phase of this study which is a Skype interview. Before you decide whether to take part it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it involves. Please take the time to carefully read the following information. If there is anything that is unclear, or you would like more information, please email me at; (Researcher email address) . Take time to decide if you want to take part or not.

What is the purpose of the study ?

This study **aims to explore the opportunities and challenges of SEE through students' and teachers' experiences of the current examination system.** No studies have yet been carried out on the experience of SEE and the findings of this study will be shared with key stakeholders such as, teachers, educational leadersand students. This will enable them to understand the experiences of those students studying for and undertaking the examinations.

Why have I been invited to participate ?

The invitation for your participation in this study implies that you have been invited because you are an experienced central government official from the Ministry of researcher will ask are attached to this sheet. Your consent will be required before the interview takes place.

What will happen to me if I take part?

If you decide to take part in the study, you will be engaged in a FGD which will take approximately 1 hour of your time and will take place at your school. The interview questions and conversation will be entertained in Nepali/ English language whichever language you feel comfortable with. Your responses will remain anonymous.

Will I be recorded and how will the recorded media be used?

The skype interview or face to face interview will be audio recorded on a password protected audio recording device and as soon as possible, the recording will be transferred to secure storage and deleted from the recording device.

The audio recordings of your activities made during this study will be used only for analysis and for illustration in conference presentations and lectures. The recordings will be anonymous. No other use will be made of them without your written permission, and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recordings.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

You will have seen the questions for the interview; it is unlikely you will become distressed during the skype interview. However, I will give careful attention to your facial and verbal expression and if I need to, stop the interview. If you become upset, I will contact the Head teacher, if necessary.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

There will be no direct benefits to you for taking part in the study, but it is hoped that this study will lead to provide practical recommendation on effective implementation of SEE. Your participation will help to understand the implications of the Secondary Education Examination and influence teachers' and students' future experiences.

What will happen to the data provided and how will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

The information you will provide as part of the study is the research study data. Any research study data from which you can be identified (e.g. from identifiers such as your name, date of birth, audio recording etc.), is known as personal data.

Personal data does not include data that cannot be identified to an individual (e.g. data collected anonymously or where identifiers have been removed).

This project will not contain any personal data. However, in the process of this research project if we (the researcher and the research team) come across any personal data, it will be stored confidentially for 5 years after the study has finished or as long as it is necessary to

verify and defend, when required, the process and outcomes of research. The period may be a few years.

Personal data will be only accessible to the researcher and the research team.

We will not tell anyone that you have taken part in this project, although there is of course a possibility that another member of Skype interview might recognise you. We will also not name you in any of our reports or publications. In addition, all participants in the Focus group discussion will be asked to respect the confidentiality of their fellow participants.

The information you will provide as part of the study is the research study data. Any research study data from which you can be identified (e.g. from identifiers such as your name, date of birth, audio recording etc.), is known as personal data.

Personal data does not include data that cannot be identified to an individual (e.g. data collected anonymously or where identifiers have been removed).

This project will not contain any personal data. However, in the process of this research project if we (the researcher and the research team) come across any personal data, it will be stored confidentially for 5 years after the study has finished or as long as it is necessary to verify and defend, when required, the process and outcomes of research. The period may be several years.

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We will not tell anyone that you have taken part in this project, although there is of course a possibility that another member of Skype interview might recognise you. We will also not name you in any of our reports or publications. In addition, all participants in the Focus group discussion will be asked to respect the confidentiality of their fellow participants.

You will not be identifiable in any ensuing reports or publications.

Your responses will be allocated as unique identifier number which will be known to the researcher and the research team only. This will be linked to a pseudonym.

We will use pseudonyms in transcripts and reports to help protect the identity of individuals and organisations **unless** you tell us that you would like to be attributed to information/direct quote etc.

Limits to confidentiality

Please note that confidentiality may not be guaranteed; for example, due to the limited size of the participant sample, the position of the participant or information included in reports, participants might be indirectly identifiable in transcripts and reports. I will work with the participant to minimise and manage the potential for indirect identification of participants. This will be promoted by ensuring the school will be kept anonymous.

I will keep confidential anything I learn or observe however I have a professional obligation to inform relevant agencies in certain exceptional circumstances, this is where you or others may be at significant risk of harm, in which case I may need to report this to

an appropriate authority. This would usually be discussed with you first. Examples of those exceptional circumstances when confidential information may have to be disclosed are if:

I believe you are at serious risk of harm, either from yourself or others

I suspect a child may be at risk of harm

You pose a serious risk of harm to, or threaten or abuse others

As a statutory requirement e.g. reporting certain infectious diseases

Under a court order requiring the University to divulge information,

I am passed information relating to an act of terrorism

What will happen to the results of the research project?

I intend to complete a PhD thesis to satisfy the requirements of a degree programme and publish the results in journal articles.

Who is organising and funding/commissioning the study?

This study is supervised by Liverpool John Moores University in UK and self-funded.

Who has reviewed this study?

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the Liverpool John Moores University Research Ethics Committee (Reference number: 18/EDN/015).

What if something goes wrong?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, please contact me and I will do my best to answer your query. I should acknowledge your concern within 10 working days and give you an indication of how I intend to deal with it. If you wish to make a complaint, please contact the chair of the Liverpool John Moores University Research Ethics Committee (researchethics@ljmu.ac.uk) and your communication will be re-directed to an independent person as appropriate.

Data Protection Notice

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Your rights to access change or move your information are limited, as we need to manage your information in specific ways for the research to be reliable and accurate. If you withdraw from the study, we will keep the information about you that we have already obtained.

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If you are concerned about how your personal data is being processed, please contact LJMU in the first instance at secretariat@ljmu.ac.uk. If you remain unsatisfied, you may wish to contact the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO). Contact details, and details of data subject rights, are available on the ICO website at: https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/data-protection-reform/overview-of-the-gdpr/individuals-rights/

16.Contact for further information

If you have any concerns regarding your involvement in this research, please discuss these with me in the first instance. If you wish to make a complaint, please contact researchethics@ljmu.ac.uk and your communication will be re-directed to an independent person as appropriate.

Thank you for reading this information sheet and for considering taking part in this study.

Note: A copy of the participant information sheet should be retained by the participant with a copy of the signed consent form.

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Appendix E: Participant Information sheet for Focus group Discussion teachers

Please read this and keep this information sheet and a question sheet for yourself.

LJMU'S Research Ethics Committee Approval Reference:18/EDN/015

School/ Faculty: Faculty of Education

Title of Project: An exploration of students' and teachers' experiences on a new grading system in Secondary Education Examinations (SEE) in Chitwan District of Nepal.

Name and contact details of the Researcher: Rhymes Shakti, Liverpool John Moores University, Immarsh Campus, Faculty of Education, L17 6BD. Email; (Researcher email address)

Name of and contact details of the Investigators (Supervisors):

- Dr. Susan Kay Flowers, Liverpool John Moores University, Faculty of Education, Health and Community, IM Marsh, Barkhill Road, Aigburth, Liverpool L17 6BD.
- Dr. Andrew Kennedy, Liverpool John Moores University, Faculty of Education, Health and Community, IM Marsh, Barkhill Road, Aigburth, Liverpool L17 6BD
- Dr. Claire Hennessy, Faculty of Education, Health and Community, IM Marsh, Barkhill Road, Aigburth, Liverpool L17 6BD

You are being invited to participate in the first phase of this study which is a Skype interview. Before you decide whether to take part it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it involves. Please take the time to carefully read the following information. If there is anything that is unclear, or you would like more information, please email me at; R.shakti@2017.ljmu.ac.uk. Take time to decide if you want to take part or not.

What is the purpose of the study ?

This study **aims to explore the opportunities and challenges of SEE through students' and teachers' experiences of the current examination system.** No studies have yet been carried out on the experience of SEE and the findings of this study will be shared with key stakeholders such as students, teachers, educational leaders and students. This will enable them to understand the experiences of those students studying for and undertaking the examinations.

Why have I been invited to participate?

The invitation for your participation in this study implies that you have been invited because you are an experienced central government official from the Ministry of Education who has played a role in the S.E.E examination. Your involvement is sought in the targeted group for this study.

Do I have to take part?

No, it is up to you to decide whether to take part or not. If you decide to you will be interviewed about your views on the SEE system by skype. A copy of the questions the

researcher will ask are attached to this sheet. Your consent will be required before the interview takes place.

What will happen to me if I take part?

If you decide to take part in the study, you will be engaged in a FGD which will take approximately 1 hour of your time and will take place at your school. The interview questions and conversation will be entertained in Nepali/ English language whichever language you feel comfortable with. Your responses will remain anonymous.

Will I be recorded and how will the recorded media be used?

The skype interview or face to face interview will be audio recorded on a password protected audio recording device and as soon as possible, the recording will be transferred to secure storage and deleted from the recording device.

The audio recordings of your activities made during this study will be used only for analysis and for illustration in conference presentations and lectures. The recordings will be anonymous. No other use will be made of them without your written permission, and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recordings.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

You will have seen the questions for the interview; it is unlikely you will become distressed during the skype interview. However, I will give careful attention to your facial and verbal expression and if I need to, stop the interview. If you become upset I will contact the Head teacher, if necessary.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

There will be no direct benefits to you for taking part in the study, but it is hoped that this study will lead to provide practical recommendation on effective implementation of SEE. Your participation will help to understand the implications of the Secondary Education Examination and influence teachers' and students' future experiences.

What will happen to the data provided and how will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

The information you will provide as part of the study is the research study data. Any research study data from which you can be identified (e.g. from identifiers such as your name, date of birth, audio recording etc.), is known as personal data.

Personal data does not include data that cannot be identified to an individual (e.g. data collected anonymously or where identifiers have been removed).

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verify and defend, when required, the process and outcomes of research. The period may be a few years.

Personal data will be only accessible to the researcher and the research team.

We will not tell anyone that you have taken part in this project, although there is of course a possibility that another member of Skype interview might recognise you. We will also not name you in any of our reports or publications. In addition, all participants in the Focus group discussion will be asked to respect the confidentiality of their fellow participants.

You will not be identifiable in any ensuing reports or publications.

Your responses will be allocated as unique identifier number which will be known to the researcher and the research team only. This will be linked to a pseudonym.

We will use pseudonyms in transcripts and reports to help protect the identity of individuals and organisations **unless** you tell us that you would like to be attributed to information/direct quote etc.

Limits to confidentiality

Please note that confidentiality may not be guaranteed; for example, due to the limited size of the participant sample, the position of the participant or information included in reports, participants might be indirectly identifiable in transcripts and reports. I will work with the participant to minimise and manage the potential for indirect identification of participants. This will be promoted by ensuring the school will be kept anonymous.

I will keep confidential anything I learn or observe however I have a professional obligation to inform relevant agencies in certain exceptional circumstances, this is where you or others may be at significant risk of harm, in which case I may need to report this to an appropriate authority. This would usually be discussed with you first. Examples of those exceptional circumstances when confidential information may have to be disclosed are if:

I believe you are at serious risk of harm, either from yourself or others

I suspect a child may be at risk of harm

You pose a serious risk of harm to, or threaten or abuse others

As a statutory requirement e.g. reporting certain infectious diseases

Under a court order requiring the University to divulge information

I am passed information relating to an act of terrorism

What will happen to the results of the research project?

I intend to complete a PhD thesis to satisfy the requirements of a degree programme and publish the results in journal articles.

Who is organising and funding/commissioning the study?

This study is supervised by Liverpool John Moores University in UK and self-funded.

Who has reviewed this study?

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the Liverpool John Moores University Research Ethics Committee (Reference number: 18/EDN/015).

What if something goes wrong?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, please contact me and I will do my best to answer your query. I should acknowledge your concern within 10 working days and give you an indication of how I intend to deal with it. If you wish to make a complaint, please contact the chair of the Liverpool John Moores University Research Ethics Committee (researchethics@ljmu.ac.uk) and your communication will be re-directed to an independent person as appropriate.

Data Protection Notice

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Your rights to access change or move your information are limited, as we need to manage your information in specific ways for the research to be reliable and accurate. If you withdraw from the study, we will keep the information about you that we have already obtained.

You can find out more about how we use your information by contacting secretariat@ljmu.ac.uk.

If you are concerned about how your personal data is being processed, please contact LJMU in the first instance at secretariat@ljmu.ac.uk. If you remain unsatisfied, you may wish to contact the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO). Contact details, and details of data subject rights, are available on the ICO website at: https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/data-protection-reform/overview-of-the-gdpr/individuals-rights/

16.Contact for further information

If you have any concerns regarding your involvement in this research, please discuss these with me in the first instance. If you wish to make a complaint, please contact researchethics@ljmu.ac.uk and your communication will be re-directed to an independent person as appropriate.

Thank you for reading this information sheet and for considering taking part in this study.

Note: A copy of the participant information sheet should be retained by the participant with a copy of the signed consent form.

Appendix F: Participant Information sheet for Focus group Discussion Parents for children aged 16

Please read this and keep this information sheet and a question sheet for yourself.

LJMU'S Research Ethics Committee Approval Reference:18/EDN/015

School/ Faculty: Faculty of Education

Title of Project: An exploration of students' and teachers' experiences on a new grading system in Secondary Education Examinations (SEE) in Chitwan District of Nepal.

Name and contact details of the Researcher :Rhymes Shakti, Liverpool John Moores University, Immarsh Campus, Faculty of Education, L17 6BD. Email; (Researcher email address)

Name of and contact details of the Investigators(Supervisors):

- Dr. Susan Kay Flowers, Liverpool John Moores University, Faculty of Education, Health and Community, IM Marsh, Barkhill Road, Aigburth, Liverpool L17 6BD.
- Dr. Andrew Kennedy, Liverpool John Moores University, Faculty of Education, Health and Community, IM Marsh, Barkhill Road, Aigburth, Liverpool L17 6BD
- Dr. Claire Hennessy, Faculty of Education, Health and Community, IM Marsh, Barkhill Road, Aigburth, Liverpool L17 6BD

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What is the purpose of the study ?

This study **aims to explore the opportunities and challenges of SEE through students' and teachers' experiences of the current examination system.** No studies have yet been carried out on the experience of SEE and the findings of this study will be shared with key stakeholders such as students, teachers, educational leaders and students. This will enable them to understand the experiences of those students studying for and undertaking the examinations.

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researcher will ask are attached to this sheet. Your consent will be required before the interview takes place.

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What are the possible benefits of taking part?

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What will happen to the data provided and how will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

The information you will provide as part of the study is the research study data. Any research study data from which you can be identified (e.g. from identifiers such as your name, date of birth, audio recording etc.), is known as personal data.

Personal data does not include data that cannot be identified with an individual (e.g. data collected anonymously or where identifiers have been removed).

This project will not contain any personal data. However, in the process of this research project if we (the researcher and the research team) come across any personal data, it will be stored confidentially for 5 years after the study has finished or as long as it is necessary to verify and defend, when required, the process and outcomes of research. The period may be a few years.

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You will not be identifiable in any ensuing reports or publications.

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I will keep confidential anything I learn or observe however I have a professional obligation to inform relevant agencies in certain exceptional circumstances, this is where you or others may be at significant risk of harm, in which case I may need to report this to an appropriate authority. This would usually be discussed with you first. Examples of those exceptional circumstances when confidential information may have to be disclosed are if:

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You pose a serious risk of harm to, or threaten or abuse others

As a statutory requirement e.g. reporting certain infectious diseases

Under a court order requiring the University to divulge information

I am passed information relating to an act of terrorism

What will happen to the results of the research project?

I intend to complete a PhD thesis to satisfy the requirements of a degree programme and publish the results in journal articles.

Who is organising and funding/commissioning the study?

This study is supervised by Liverpool John Moores University in UK and self-funded.

Who has reviewed this study?

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What if something goes wrong?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, please contact me and I will do my best to answer your query. I should acknowledge your concern within 10 working days and give you an indication of how I intend to deal with it. If you wish to make a complaint, please contact the chair of the Liverpool John Moores University Research Ethics Committee (researchethics@ljmu.ac.uk) and your communication will be re-directed to an independent person as appropriate.

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Your rights to access change or move your information are limited, as we need to manage your information in specific ways for the research to be reliable and accurate. If you withdraw from the study, we will keep the information about you that we have already obtained.

You can find out more about how we use your information by contacting secretariat@ljmu.ac.uk.

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Thank you for reading this information sheet and for considering taking part in this study.

Note: A copy of the participant information sheet should be retained by the participant with a copy of the signed consent form.

Appendix G: Participant Information sheet for Gatekeepers for Focus group Discussion for children aged 16

Please read this and keep this information sheet and a question sheet for yourself.

LJMU'S Research Ethics Committee Approval Reference:18/EDN/015

School/ Faculty: Faculty of Education

Title of Project: An exploration of students' and teachers' experiences on a new grading system in Secondary Education Examinations (SEE) in Chitwan District of Nepal.

Name and contact details of the Researcher :Rhymes Shakti, Liverpool John Moores University, Immarsh Campus, Faculty of Education, L17 6BD. Email; (Researcher email address)

Name of and contact details of the Investigators(Supervisors):

Lead supervisor , Liverpool John Moores University, Faculty of Education, Health and Community, IM Marsh, Barkhill Road, Aigburth, Liverpool L17 6BD.

Dr. Andrew Kennedy, Liverpool John Moores University, Faculty of Education, Health and Community, IM Marsh, Barkhill Road, Aigburth, Liverpool L17 6BD

Dr. Claire Hennessy, Faculty of Education, Health and Community, IM Marsh, Barkhill Road, Aigburth, Liverpool L17 6BD

You are being invited to participate in the first phase of this study which is a focus group discussion. Before you decide whether to take part it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it involves. Please take the time to carefully read the following information. If there is anything that is unclear, or you would like more information, please email me at; R.shakti@2017.ljmu.ac.uk. Take time to decide if you want to take part or not.

What is the purpose of the study ?

This study **aims to explore the opportunities and challenges of SEE through students' and teachers' experiences of the current examination system.** No studies have yet been carried out on the experience of SEE and the findings of this study will be shared with key stakeholders such as students, teachers, educational leaders and students. This will enable them to understand the experiences of those students studying for and undertaking the examinations.

Why have I been invited to participate ?

The invitation for your participation in this study implies that you have been invited because you are an experienced central government official from the Ministry of Education who has played a role in the S.E.E examination. Your involvement is sought in the targeted group for this study.

Do I have to take part?

No, it is up to you to decide whether to take part or not. If you decide to you will be interviewed about your views on the SEE system by skype. A copy of the questions the researcher will ask are attached to this sheet. Your consent will be required before the interview takes place.

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Will I be recorded and how will the recorded media be used?

The skype interview or face to face interview will be audio recorded on a password protected audio recording device and as soon as possible, the recording will be transferred to secure storage and deleted from the recording device.

The audio recordings of your activities made during this study will be used only for analysis and for illustration in conference presentations and lectures. The recordings

Will be anonymous. No other use will be made of them without your written permission, and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recordings.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

You will have seen the questions for the focus group discussion; it is unlikely you will become distressed during the skype interview. However, I will give careful attention to your facial and verbal expression and if I need to, stop the interview. If you become upset, I will contact the Head teacher, if necessary.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

There will be no direct benefits to you for taking part in the study, but it is hoped that this study will lead to provide practical recommendation on effective implementation of SEE. Your participation will help to understand the implications of the Secondary Education Examination and influence teachers' and students' future experiences.

What will happen to the data provided and how will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

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This project will not contain any personal data. However, in the process of this research project if we (the researcher and the research team) come across any personal data, it will be stored confidentially for 5 years after the study has finished or if it is necessary to verify

and defend, when required, the process and outcomes of research. The time may be several years.

Personal data will be only accessible to the researcher and the research team. We will not tell anyone that you have taken part in this project, although there is of course a possibility that another member of Skype interview might recognise you. We will also not name you in any of our reports or publications. In addition, all participants in the Focus group discussion will be asked to respect the confidentiality of their fellow participants. You will not be identifiable in any ensuing reports or publications.

Your responses will be allocated as unique identifier number which will be known to the researcher and the research team only. This will be linked to a pseudonym.

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I will keep confidential anything I learn or observe however I have a professional obligation to inform relevant agencies in certain exceptional circumstances, this is where you or others may be at significant risk of harm, in which case I may need to report this to an appropriate authority. This would usually be discussed with you first. Examples of those exceptional circumstances when confidential information may have to be disclosed are if:

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Under a court order requiring the University to divulge information

I am passed information relating to an act of terrorism

What will happen to the results of the research project?

I intend to complete a PhD thesis to satisfy the requirements of a degree programme and publish the results in journal articles.

Who is organising and funding/commissioning the study?

This study is supervised by Liverpool John Moores University in UK and self-funded.

Who has reviewed this study?

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the Liverpool John Moores University Research Ethics Committee (Reference number: 18/EDN/015).

What if something goes wrong?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, please contact me and I will do my best to answer your query. I should acknowledge your concern within 10 working days and give you an indication of how I intend to deal with it. If you wish to make a complaint, please contact the chair of the Liverpool John Moores University Research Ethics

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16.Contact for further information

If you have any concerns regarding your involvement in this research, please discuss these with me in the first instance. If you wish to make a complaint, please contact researchethics@ljmu.ac.uk and your communication will be re-directed to an independent person as appropriate.

Thank you for reading this information sheet and for considering taking part in this study.

Note: A copy of the participant information sheet should be retained by the participant with a copy of the signed consent form.

Appendix H: Participants information sheet for Government officials

Please read this and keep this information sheet and a question sheet for yourself.

Interview with Central Government official CGO/DGO School/ Faculty: Faculty of Education

Title of Project: An exploration of students' and teachers' experiences on a new grading system in Secondary Education Examinations (SEE) in Chitwan District of Nepal.

Name and contact details of the Researcher :Rhymes Shakti, Liverpool John Moores University, Immarsh Campus, Faculty of Education, L17 6BD. Email; (Researcher email address)

Name of and contact details of the Investigators(Supervisors):

Dr. Susan Kay Flowers, Liverpool John Moores University, Faculty of Education, Health and Community, IM Marsh, Barkhill Road, Aigburth, Liverpool L17 6BD.

Dr. Andrew Kennedy, Liverpool John Moores University, Faculty of Education, Health and Community, IM Marsh, Barkhill Road, Aigburth, Liverpool L17 6BD

Dr. Claire Hennessy, Faculty of Education, Health and Community, IM Marsh, Barkhill Road, Aigburth, Liverpool L17 6BD

You are being invited to participate in the first phase of this study which is a Skype interview. Before you decide whether to take part it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it involves. Please take the time to carefully read the following information. If there is anything that is unclear, or you would like more information, please email me at; R.shakti@2017.ljmu.ac.uk. Take time to decide if you want to take part or not.

What is the purpose of the study?

This study aims to explore the opportunities and challenges of SEE through students' and teachers' experiences of the current examination system. No studies have yet been carried out on the experience of SEE and the findings of this study will be shared with key stakeholders such as, teachers, educational leadersand students. This will enable them to understand the experiences of those students studying for and undertaking the examinations.

Why have I been invited to participate?

The invitation for your participation in this study implies that you have been invited because you are an experienced central government official from the Ministry of Education who has played a role in the S.E.E examination. Your involvement is sought in the targeted group for this study.

Do I have to take part?

No, it is up to you to decide whether to take part or not. If you decide to you will be interviewed about your views on the SEE system by skype. A copy of the questions the researcher will ask are attached to this sheet. Your consent will be required before the interview takes place.

What will happen to me if I take part?

If you decide to take part in the study, you will be engaged in a face-to-face interview which will take approximately 1 hour of your time and will take place at your school. The interview questions and conversation will be conducted in Nepali/ English language, whichever language you feel comfortable with. Your responses will remain anonymous.

Will I be recorded and how will the recorded media be used?

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What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

You will have seen the questions for the interview; it is unlikely you will become distressed during the skype interview. However, I will give careful attention to your facial and verbal expression and if I need to, stop the interview. If you become upset, I will contact the Head teacher, if necessary.

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What will happen to the results of the research project?

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16.Contact for further information

If you have any concerns regarding your involvement in this research, please discuss these with me in the first instance. If you wish to make a complaint, please contact researchethics@ljmu.ac.uk and your communication will be re-directed to an independent person as appropriate.

Thank you for reading this information sheet and for considering taking part in this study.

Note: A copy of the participant information sheet should be retained by the participant with a copy of the signed consent form.

Appendix I: All Participants consent forms for skype interview and focus group discussions

Title of Project: An exploration of students' and teachers' experiences on a new grading system in Secondary Education Examinations in Chitwan District of Nepal

Please tick the boxes below if you have understood and are happy to participate in this research. Please read the Participant information sheet before answering the points below. Please keep a copy of the participant information sheets for yourself AND RETURN YOUR CONSENT FORM IN A CLOSED ENVELOPE TO the vice principal or the HEAD TEACHER(Principal)

By: Rhymes Shakti, Faculty of Education, LJMU.

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information provided for the above study. I have had the chance to ask any questions. These were answered satisfactorily. ☐
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason, in line with my legal rights. ☐
3. I understand that any personal information collected during the study will be anonymised and confidential and that I will not be able to identify from it
4. I agree to take part in this study ☐
5. I understand that the interview will be audio recorded and I am happy to proceed with the interview understand that parts of our conversation may be used verbatim in future publications or presentations but that such quotes will be anonymised. ☐

Name of Participant Date Signature

Name of Researcher: Rhymes Shakti Date Signature

Appendix J: Questions in English for students in Pilot study

1. How have you experienced SEE so far?
2. Which subjects did you do well in?
3. Which subjects did you feel you could have done better in?
4. Can you explain your understanding of the grading system?
5. Do you like the grading system?
6. Can you explain your understanding of your Grade Point Average?
7. What have you seen in SEE so far?
8. Do you think there are any disadvantages?
9. What might be some of the challenges of SEE?
10. Are there any advantages in SEE?
11. Can you describe your experience of assessment in the new examination system?
12. Have you found the teachers are able to support you with the assessments in SEE?

Appendix K: Questions in English for students for Focus group discussion

1. How have you experienced SEE so far? Why
2. Which subjects did you do well in? Why?
3. Which subjects did you feel you could have done better in?
4. Can you explain your understanding of the grading system?
5. Do you like the grading system? If yes, why ? If No, why?
6. Can you explain your understanding of your Grade Point Average? Do you agree to what your friends are saying? If not, why ?
7. What kinds of things (good or bad) have you observed so far in the SEE?
8. Do you think there are any disadvantages?
9. What might be some of the challenges of SEE?
10. Are there any advantages in SEE?
11. Can you describe your experience of assessment in the new examination system?
12. Have you found the teachers are able to support you with the assessments in SEE? Do you all experience the same or something different ?
13. What are your thoughts about the practical (hands-on) examinations in the SEE?

Probes if necessary

14. Optional question: Do you think it is easy to pass the SEE examinations?

- If yes, do you think the examinations have improved?
- If yes, why? If not, why not?

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Appendix L: Questions for Focus group discussion with teachers

Study title: An exploration of students' and teachers' experiences of the new grading system of Secondary Education Examination (SEE) in Chitwan district of Nepal.

Liverpool John Moores University Research Ethics Committee Approval Reference: 18/EDN/015

Questions for Focus group discussion with teachers

1) What benefits have you seen from the SEE system here?
2) What disadvantages have you seen from the SEE system?
3) What problems have you seen in relation to the construction of the curriculum according to the SEE system?

E.g.: a) Training of teachers?

b) Student's assessment? How? Why?
c) After SLC, what are the attitudes of the students towards the new grading system? Easy or difficult?

If necessary, Probes used: Do you agree with other participants? If not why?

4) What do you think is the relationship between grading and learning for students after the new grading system?
5) Has the SEE exam system really made it easier to pass the exam? If it's made easier, do you think it's improved? Why do you think so? Why not?
6) If literacy means only knowing how to read and write, how does the SEE system increase the literacy rate? Why do students learn to read and write from class 3?

Why, how?

7) What kind of support has been received from Nepal government for effective implementation of SEE new grading system? Can you explain a little? Like: Teachers' training? , marking and assessment?

८)यहाँलाई यो SEE को मूल्याङ्कन गने क्रममा केकस्ता समस्या/अप्ठ्याराहरू महसुस गनुर्भएको छ?केकस्ता कुराहरू अझै बुझ्न बाँकी छ जस्तो लाग्छ वा केही भ्रमहरू अझै प्रष्ट पानुर् पछु जस्तो लाग्छ ?

9) What problems seen in the SLC system do you think have been solved by the SEE system? Like soul killing rate, difficult to pass SLC?

7) Some students did not have answers to my questions, for example what is (GPA)? Why didn't the students have an answer, is there any response here?

8) In order to improve the SEE system, what subjects and areas (Sections) do you think need to be improved?

12) Is there any feedback about SEE practical exams?

13) SEE students have said that the marks of external and internal exams are very different. Any feedback on this?

14) What is the reaction here on single subject certification of SEE system?

15) What are the effects of federalization in the context of the SEE system?

16) When does it feel like the SEE system is designed to get more aid and grants from donors? Why do you think so? Why not?

17) What has been the experience of the SEE system, as a teacher of SEE ?

अध्ययनको शीर्ुक: नेपालको ववववभन्न वजल्लामा माध्यवमक वशक्षा परीक्षा (SEE) को नयाँ ग्रेविङ प्रणालीमा ववद्यार्थीहरू र वशक्षकहरूको अनुभवको एक अन्वेर्ण ।

Study title: An exploration of students' and teachers' experiences of the new grading system of Secondary Education Examination (SEE) in Chitwan district of Nepal.

1. Interview questions with Central Government Official of Ministry of Education

अध्ययनको शीर्षक: नेपालको चितवन चिल्लामा माध्यचमक चशक्षा परीक्षा (SEE) को नयाँ ग्रेचिङ प्रणालीमा चवद्यार्थीहरू र चशक्षकहरूको अनुभवको एक अन्वेर्ण । Study title: An exploration of students' and teachers' experiences of the new grading system of Secondary Education Examination (SEE) in Chitwan district of Nepal.

चलभरपुल िोन मुषिचवश्वचवद्यालय अनुसन्धान नैचतक सचमचत स्वीकृचत सन्दभष: 18 / EDN / 015
Liverpool John Moores University Research Ethics Committee Approval Reference: 18/EDN/015

चशक्षा मन्त्रालयका केन्द्रीय सरकारी अचिकारीसाँग अन्तवाषताष प्रश्नहरु: Interview questions with central Government official of Ministry of Education

१) यहाँले एस ई (SEE) प्रणालीबाट के-कस्ता फाइदाहरू देख्नुभएको छ?

1. What benefits have you seen from the SEE system here?

२) यहाँले एस ई (SEE) प्रणालीबाट के-कस्ता बेफाइदाहरू देख्नुभएको छ? 2) What disadvantages have you seen from the SEE system?

३) एस ई (SEE) प्रणाली बमोवजमको पायक्रमको वनमाुण सम्बन्धमा के-कस्ता समस्याहरू देख्नुभएको छ? जस्तै: क) वशक्षकहरूको प्रवशक्षण? 3) What problems do system have in relation to the construction of the curriculum according to the SEE system? Eg: a) Training of teachers? ख) ववद्यार्थीको मूल्याङ्कन? कसरी? वकन? b) Student's assessment? How? Why? ग) SLC पछाि, नयाँ ग्रेविङ प्रणालीको बारेमा ववद्यार्थीहरूको कस्तो मनोवृवि (attitudes) पाउनुभएको छ? After SLC, what are the attitudes of the

students towards the new grading system? Easy or difficult?

४) नयाँ ग्रेविङ प्रणाली पश्चात् यहाँलाई ववद्यार्थीहरूको लावग ग्रेविङ र वसक्ने कुराहरुको (Grading and Learning) सम्बन्ध कस्तो छ जस्तो लाग्छ? 4) What do you think is the relationship between grading and learning for students after the new grading system?

५) एस ई (SEE) परीक्षा प्रणालीले साँच्चिकै परीक्षा पास गनु सवजलो बनाएको छ? यवद यो सवजलो बनाएको छ भने, केयो सुधार भएको छ जस्तो लाग्छ? लाग्छ भने वकन? लाग्दैन भने वकन? 5) Has the SEE exam system really made it easier to pass the exam? If it's made easier, do you think it's improved? Why do you think so? Why not?

६) यवद साक्षरताको (literacy) अर्थु पढ्न र लेख्न मात्र जान्नु हो भने, SEE प्रणालीले कसरी साक्षरता दर (literacy rate) बढाउँछ? वकनकी पढ्न र लेख्न कक्षा ३ देच्चखनै ववद्यार्थीहरुले जानेका हुन्छन्? वकन, कसरी? 6) If literacy means only knowing how to read and write, how does the SEE system increase the literacy rate? Why do students learn to read and write from class 3? Why, how?

७) एस ई (SEE) नयाँ ग्रेविङ प्रणालीको प्रभावकारी कायान्वयन गनु नेपाल सरकारबाट के-कस्ता सहयोगहरु प्राप्त भएका छन्? थरैि व्याख्या गनु सक्नुहुन्छ? जस्तै: Teachers' training (वशक्षकहरुको प्रवशक्षण)?, marking (अङ्क वदने प्रवक्रया) र assessment (मूल्याङ्कन)? 7) What kind of support has been received from Nepal government for effective implementation of SEE new grading system? Can you explain a little? Like: Teachers' training? ,marking and assessment?

८) यहाँलाई यो SEE को मूल्याङ्कन गने क्रममा के-कस्ता समस्या/अप्ठ्याराहरू महसुस गनुभएको छ? के-कस्ता कुराहरू अझै बुझ्न बाँकी छ जस्तो लाग्छ वा केही भ्रमहरू अझै प्रष्ट पानु पछु जस्तो लाग्छ? 8) What problems/difficulties have you felt while assessing this SEE? What things do you think are still left to be understood or what confusions need to be clarified?

९) SLC प्रणालीमा देच्चखएका के-कस्ता समस्याहरू SEE प्रणालीबाट समाधान/हल गररएको छ जस्तो लाग्छ? जस्तै आत्मा हत्या दर, SLC पास हुन गाह्रो? वकन? 9) What problems seen in the SLC system do you think have been solved by the SEE system? Like suicide rate, difficult to pass SLC? why?

१०) केही ववद्यार्थीहरुसाँग मेरो प्रश्नहरुको जवाफ वर्थएन, उदाहरणको लावग (GPA) भनेको केहो? ववद्यार्थीहरुसाँग वकन जवाफ वर्थएन होला, यसमा यहाँको केही प्रवतवक्रया छ वक? 10) Some students did not have answers to my questions, for example what is (GPA)? Why didn't the students have an answer, is there any response here?

११) यहाँलाई SEE प्रणालीमा सुधार ल्याउन केकस्ता ववर्य र क्षेत्रहरुमा (Sections) सुधार गनु पने देच्चखन्छ जस्तो लाग्छ? वकन? 11) In order to improve the SEE system, what subjects and areas (Sections) do you think need to be improved? Why?

१२) SEE को प्राच्चिकल (practical exams) परीक्षाहरुको बारेमा यहाँको केही प्रवतवक्रया छ वक? 12) Is there any feedback about SEE practical exams?

१३) SEE को ववद्यार्थीहरुले ववद्यालयको बावहर गरेको जाँच र आन्तररक (External and Internal exams) परीक्षाको माकु धेरै नै फरक परेको छ भनेका छन्। यो ववर्यमा यहाँको केही प्रवतवक्रया? 13) SEE students have said that the marks of external and internal exams are very different. Any feedback on this?

१४) SEE प्रणालीको एकल ववर्य प्रमाणीकरण (Single subject certification) मा यहाँको केही प्रवतवक्रया वक? 14) What is the reaction here on single subject certification of SEE system?

१५) यहाँको ववचारमा SEE प्रणालीको सन्दभुमा संघीयकरण (Federalisation) को प्रभावहरु के-केहुनसक्छ? 15) What are the effects of federalization in the context of the SEE system?

१६) यहाँलाई कवहले यस्तो लाग्छ वक, SEE प्रणालीले दातृराष्ट्र बाट थप सहयोग/अनुदान (aid and grant) प्राप्त गनु विजाइन गररएको जस्तो? लाग्छ भने वकन? लाग्दैन भने वकन?

16) When does it feel like the SEE system is designed to get more aid and grants from donors? Why do you think so? Why not?

१७) यहाँलाई SEE प्रणाली समग्रमा, वचवकत्सा वशक्षा आयोगका सदस्य सवचव र पूवु अनुभवी वशक्षा मन्त्रालयका सहसवचव भएको नाताले कस्तो अनुभव गनु भएको छ?

17) What has been the experience of the SEE system as a whole, as a member secretary of the Medical Education Commission and a former co-secretary of the Ministry of Education?

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Appendix M: Questions for District Education Officer (DEO)in two languages

अध्ययनको शीर्षक: नेपालको चितवन चिल्लामा एक माध्यचमक चशक्षा परीक्षा (एस ई ई) मा एक नयाँ ग्रेचिङ प्रणालीमा चवद्यार्थीहरु र चशक्षकहरुको अनुभवको एक अन्वेर्ण । Title of Project: An exploration of students' and teachers' experiences on a new grading system in Secondary Education Examinations in Chitwan District of Nepal

एलिएमयू ररसिष नैचतक सचमचत स्वीकृचत सन्दभष: 18 / EDN / 015 LJMU research community ethical approved no: 18/EDN/015

चिल्ला चशक्षा अचिकारीसाँग अन्तवाषताषको प्रश्नहरु: Interview Questions with District Education Officer:

१) तपाईंले के-कस्ता कुराहरु एस ई (SEE) को फाइदा देख्नुभएको छ?

1. What are the advantages you have seen from SEE?

२) एस ई (SEE) मा के-कस्ता कुराहरु बेफाइदा देख्नुभएको छ? 2) What are the disadvantages of SEE?

३) एस ई (SEE) को लावग पायक्रमको सम्बन्धमा समस्याहरू के-केछन्? 3) What were the issues faced in

Curriculum? a) वशक्षकहरूको प्रवशक्षण? (Teachers' training?) b) मूल्याङ्कन? (Evaluation)

Probes: कसरी? वकन?

(how?, why?) c) नयाँ ग्रेविङ प्रणालीको लागु गनुमा ववद्यार्थीको कस्तो मनोवृवि (attitudes) देख्नुभएको छ?

c) After implementation of SEE, how was the students' attitudes, have you all seen?

४) तपाईंलाई ववद्यार्थीहरूको लावग ग्रेविङ र वसक्नेकुराहरुको (grading and Learning) सम्बन्ध कस्तो छ जस्तो लाग्छ?

4) What do you think is the relationship between grading and learning for students?

५) केतपाईं सोच्नुहुन्छ एस ई ले साँच्चिकै परीक्षा पास गनु सवजलो बनाएको छ? यवद यो सवजलो छ भने, केयो सुधार भएको छ जस्तो लाग्छ? लाग्छ भने वकन? लाग्दैन भने वकन?

5) Do you think SEE really made it easier to pass the exam? If it's easy, do you think it's

improved? Why do you think so? Why not?

६) (Literacy) साक्षरताको अर्थु पढ्न र लेख्न मात्र जान्नु हो भने, SEE ले साक्षरता दर (literacy rate) कसरी बढाउँछ? वकनकी पढ्न र लेख्न कक्षा ३ देच्चखनै आउँदछ? Probes: वकन, कसरी?

6) (Literacy) If the meaning of literacy is to know how to read and write, how does SEE increase the literacy rate? Because reading and writing comes from class 3? Probes: Why, how?

७) यो नयाँ ग्रेविङ प्रणालीको पररवतुनको क्रममा (२०१६ मा) नेपाल सरकारले के-कस्ता सहयोगहरु गयो? थोरै व्याख्या गनु सक्नुहुन्छ? जस्तै: Teachers' training (वशक्षकहरूको प्रवशक्षण)?, marking (अङ्क वदने प्रवक्रया) र assessment (मूल्याङ्कन) बुझाउन सरकारको पहल कस्तो रह्यो?

7) During the change of this new grading system (in 2016), what kind of assistance did the Nepalese government does? Can you explain a little? Like: Teachers' training? How was the government's initiative to explain marking and assessment?

८) तपाईंलाई यो SEE को मूल्याङ्कनमा केकस्ता कुराहरु अझै बुझ्न बाँकी छ जस्तो लाग्छ वा केही भ्रमहरु अझै प्रष्ट पानुपछु जस्तो लाग्छ? 8) What things do you think are still to be understood in this SEE assessment or do you think some confusions should be clarified?

९) तपाईंलाई SLC मा आएको के-कस्ता समस्याहरु SEE मा हल गररएको छ जस्तो लाग्छ?

9) What problems do you think in SLC have been solved in SEE?

१०) केही ववद्यार्थीहरुसाँग मेरो प्रश्नहरुको जवाफ वर्थएन, उदाहरणको लावग (GPA) को भनेको केहो? ववद्यार्थीहरुसाँग वकन जवाफ वर्थएन होला, यसमा तपाईंको केही प्रवतवक्रया?

10) Some students did not have answers to my questions, for example, what does (GPA) mean? Why didn't the students have an answer? Yes, do you have any feedback?

११) तपाईंलाई SEE मा सुधार ल्याउन पने कुन क्षेत्रहरु (Sections) हो जस्तो लाग्छ? probe: वकन?

11) What areas (Sections) do you think should be improved in SEE? Probe: Why?

१२) SEE को प्राच्चिकल (practical exams) परीक्षाहरुको बारेमा तपाईंको केही प्रवतवक्रया?

12) Do you have any feedback about the practical exams of SEE?

१३) SEE को ववद्यार्थीहरुले ववद्यालयको बावहर गरेको जाँच र आन्तररक (External and Internal exams) परीक्षाको माकु धेरै नै फरक परेको छ भनेका छन्। यो ववर्यमा तपाईंहरुको केही प्रवतवक्रया?

13) The students of SEE have said that the marks of external and internal exams are very different. Any feedback on this?

१४) SEE को एकल ववर्य प्रमाणीकरण (Single subject certification) मा तपाईंको केही प्रवतवक्रया?

14) Do you have any feedback on single subject certification of SEE?

१५) तपाईंको ववचारमा SEE को सन्दभुमा संघीयकरण (Federalisation) को प्रभावहरु के-केहुनसक्छ?

15) In your opinion, what are the effects of federalization in terms of SEE?

१६) तपाईंलाई कवहले यस्तो लाग्छ वक, SEE ववदेशबाट र्थप दानहरु संकलन गनु विजाइन गररएको जस्तो? लाग्छ भने वकन? लाग्दैन भने वकन?

16) When do you feel that SEE is designed to collect more donations from abroad? Why do you think so? Why not?

१७) कुल वमलाएर, तपाईंले SEE सन्दभुमा, वजल्ला वशक्षा अवधकारी भएको नाताले कस्तो अनुभव गनु भएको छ? Probes if necessary: वकन?

17) Overall, what has been your experience as District Education Officer in terms of SEE? Probes if necessary:

Why?

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Appendix N: **Gatekeeper Consent Form (English and Nepali version)**

Study Title: An Exploration of Students' and Teachers' Experiences of a New Grading System (SEE) in Chitwan District of Nepal

Researcher:
Rhymes Shakti
Liverpool John Moores University
IM Marsh Campus, Faculty of Education, L17 6BD
Email: (Researcher email address)

Consent to Conduct Research in the School

Please read the Participant Information Sheet provided with this consent form. If you are satisfied with the information provided and agree to allow the research to be conducted within your school, please tick the appropriate boxes below and sign the form.

☐ **1.** I confirm that I have read and understood the information provided about the above study.

☐ **2.** I have had the opportunity to obtain further information and ask questions about the study, and any questions have been answered satisfactorily.

☐ **3.** I understand that participation in this research is voluntary and that participating students and teachers may withdraw from the study without giving a reason and without affecting their rights.

☐ **4.** I understand that personal information collected during the study will be treated confidentially and that participants and the school will not be identified in the reporting of the research.

☐ **5.** I give permission for the researcher to approach eligible students and teachers within the school for participation in the research, subject to the appropriate consent procedures.

☐ **6.** I give permission for the agreed research activities, including focus group discussions with participating students and teachers, to take place within the school.

☐ **7.** I understand that the information collected will be handled in accordance with the applicable data protection requirements.

☐ **8.** On behalf of the school, I agree to the school's participation in this research study.

Name of School:

……

Name of Gatekeeper/Head Teacher:

……

Position:

……

Email Address / Telephone Number:

……

Signature:

……

Date:

……

LIVERPOOL JOHN MOORES UNIVERSITY

अभिि ावकको मञ्जुरी पत्र

अध्ययनको शीर्षक:

नपेालको भितवन भजल्लामा माध्यभमक भशक्षा परीक्षा *(SEE)* को नयाँ ग्रभेि ङ प्रणालीसम्बन्धी भवद्यार्थी तर्था भशक्षकहरूको अनुि वको अन्वेर्ण

अनुसन्धानकताष:

Rhymes Shakti
Liverpool John Moores University

IM Marsh Campus, Faculty of Education, L17 6BD
Email: (Researcher email address)

भवद्यार्थीको सहिाभिताका लाभि अभिि्ावकको मञ्जुरी

कृपया यस मञ्जुरी पत्रसाँि उपलब्ध ि्राइएको सहिाि्ी जानकारी पत्र (Participant Information Sheet) ध्यानपूवषक पढ्नुहोस्। उपलब्ध ि्राइएको जानकारीबाट तपाईं सन्तुष्ट हुनुहुन्छ र आप्नो बच्चालाई यस अध्ययनमा सहिाि्ी हुन अनुमभत भिन सहमत हुनुहुन्छ ि्ने, कृपया तलका बक्सहरूमा ठीक भिन्ह (✓) लिाई फारममा हस्ताक्षर ि्नुषहोस्।

☐ १. म पुभष्ट ि्िषछु भक मैले माभर्थ उल्लेख ि्ररएको अध्ययनसम्बन्धी उपलब्ध ि्राइएको जानकारी पढेको र बुझेको छु।

☐ २. मैले यस अध्ययनसम्बन्धी प्रश्नहरू सोध्ने अवसर पाएको छु र मेरा प्रश्नहरूको सन्तोर्जनक जवाफ पाएको छु।

☐ ३. मैले बुझेको छु भक मेरो बच्चाको यस अध्ययनमा सहिाभिता स्वेच्छिक हो र उसले कुनै कारण नभिई कुनै पभन समयमा अध्ययनबाट आप्नो सहिाभिता भफताष भलन सक्छ, र यसले उसको अभिकार वा भवद्यालयको अध्ययनमा कुनै असर पाने छैन।

☐ ४. मैले बुझेको छु भक अध्ययनको क्रममा सङ्कलन ि्ररएका व्यच्छि्ित जानकारीहरू ि्ोप्य राच्छखनेछन् र अनुसन्धानको प्रभतवे्िनमा मेरो बच्चा वा उसको भवद्यालयको पभहिान खुलाइने छैन।

☐ ५. म मेरो बच्चालाई यस अनुसन्धानका ि्भतभवभिहरूमा, केच्छित सामूभहक छलफल (Focus Group Discussion) वा अन्तवाषतासभहत, सहिाि्ी हुन अनुमभत भिन्छु।

☐ ६. मैले बुझेको छु भक सङ्कलन ि्ररएको जानकारी लाि्ू हुने तथ्याङ्क सुरक्षा सम्बन्धी भनयमहरूअनुसार सुरभक्षत रूपमा व्यवस्थापन ि्ररनेछ।

अभिि्ावकको नाम:

.....

भवद्यार्थीको नाम:

.....

भवद्यालयको नाम:

.....

अभिि्ावकको इमेल वा फोन नम्बर:

.....

अभिि◌ावकको हस्ताक्षर:

.....

भमभत:

.....

Appendix O: Consent form used for students aged 16 in Nepali version
चवद्यार्थीहरुसाँगको (FGD) केन्द्रन्द्रत सामूचहक छलफलहरुका लाचग १६ वर्षका चवद्यार्थीहरु

(Students aged 16) को मञ्ि ुरी पत्र

यो फारम पभढसकेपभछ, यभि तपाईं यस अध्ययनमा सहिाि ी हुन सहमत हुनुहुन्छ ि ने कृपया यो फारम

ि नुषहोस् र हस्ताक्षर ि री खाममा भशलबन्द ि रेर तपाईंको स्कूलको हेि सरलाई वा मलाई भिनुहोस्।

अध्ययनको शीर्षक:
नेपालको भितवन भजल्लामा माध्यभमक भशक्षा परीक्षा (एसईई) को नयाँ ग्रेभिङ प्रणालीमा भवद्यार्थीहरू र भशक्षकहरूको अनुि वको एक अन्वेर्ण।

अध्ययनकर्तषको नतम र सम्पकष वि रण:
Rhymes Shakti

Liverpool John Moores University
IM Marsh Campus, Faculty of Education, L17 6BD
Email: (Researcher email address)

कृपया यस अध्ययनको भववरण बुझनुिएको सुभनभित भिनतल भिइएका बक्सहरूमा ठीक भिन्ह (✓) लिाउनुहोस्। मञ्जुरी भिनुअभि कृपया यसैसाँि संलग्न िररएको सहिाि ी (Participant) जानकारी पत्र पढ्नुहोस्।

☐ **१.** म भनभित छु भक मैले माभर्थको अध्ययनका लाभि उपलब्ध िराइएको जानकारी पढेको र बुझेको छु।

☐ **२.** मैले जानकारी भलने र प्रश्न सोध्ने मौका पाएको छु र भतनका सन्तोर्जनक जवाफहरू पाएको छु।

☐ **३.** मैले बुझेको छु भक मेरो सहिाभिता स्वेच्छिक हो र कुनै पभन बेला कुनै स्पष्टीकरण नभिई सहिाभिता स्थभित भिन स्वतन्त्र छु र यसले मेरो वैि ाभनक अभिकारमा कुनै असर पाने छैन।

☐ **४.** मैले बुझेको छु भक अध्ययनको अवभिमा सङ्कभलत कुनै पभन व्यच्छिि त जानकारी अज्ञात वा ि ोप्य राच्छखनेछ र यसमा म ढुक्क छु।

☐ **५.** म यस अध्ययनमा सहिाि ी हुन सहमत छु।

☐ **६.** म तथ्याङ्क सुरक्षा ऐनअनुसार मेरो जानकारी व्यवस्थापन िररने कुरामा सहमत छु।

कृपयत र्पतईंको Email ID र फोन नम्बर यहताँ लेख्नुहोस्:

.....

कृपयत र्पतईंको स्कूलको नतम यहताँ लेख्नुहोस्:

.....

कृपयत कक्षत ११ मत कुन विर्य अध्ययन गर्दै हुनुहुन्छ यहताँ लेख्नुहोस्:

.....

हस्ततक्षर:

.....

वमवर्:

.....

Appendix P: Participant assent form Nepali version

चवद्यार्थीहरुसाँगको (FGD) केन्द्रन्द्रत सामूचहक छलफलहरुका लाचग १४-१५ वर्षका चवद्यार्थीहरु (Students aged 14-15)

को मञ्ि ुरी (assent) पत्र

यो फारम पभढसकेपभछ, यभि तपाईं यस अध्ययनमा सहिाि ी हुन सहमत हुनुहुन्छ ि ने कृपया यस फारममा 'छ वा छैन' मा ि ोलो लिाएर ि ुनिहोस्। आफ्नो नाम, भवद्यालयको नाम, कक्षा ११ मा कुन भवर्य अध्ययन ि ि ै हुनुहुन्छ र भमभत लेखेर, खाममा भशलबन्द ि री तपाईंको स्कूलको हे ि सरलाई वा मलाई भिनुहुन अनुरो ि ि षछु। यभि तपाईं यस अध्ययनमा ि ाि भलन ि ाहनुहुन्छ ि ने मात्र यो फारम ि ुनिहोला।

अध्ययनको शीर्षक:

नेपालको भितवन भजल्लामा माध्यभमक भशक्षा परीक्षा (एसईई) को नयाँ ग्रेभिङ प्रणालीमा भवद्यार्थीहरू र भशक्षकहरूको अनुिवको एक अन्वेर्ण।

- केतपाईंले सहिाि ी जानकारी पत्र पढ्नुिएको छ? **छ / छैन**
- केतपाईंलाई हेिसर वा उप-हेिसरले यस अध्ययनको बारेमा व्याख्या िनुषिएको छ? **छ / छैन**
- केतपाईंले अध्ययनको बारेमा बुEनुिएको छ? **छ / छैन**
- केतपाईंले अध्ययनको बारेमा प्रश्नहरू सोध्नुिएको छ? **छ / छैन**
- केतपाईंले सोिेका प्रश्नहरूको जवाफ राम्रोसाँि बुEनुिएको छ? **छ / छैन**
- केतपाईंले बुEनुिएको छ भक यो अन्तवाषताष तपाईंले कुनै पभन बेला रोक्न सक्नुहुन्छ? **छ / छैन**
- केतपाईं यसमा ि ाि भलन खुशी हुनुहुन्छ? **छ / छैन**

यभि तपाईंको जवाफ कुनै प्रश्नमा 'छैन' छ िने वा यस अध्ययनमा तपाईं ि ाि भलन ि ाहनुहुन्न फारममा नाम िने यस नलेख्नुहोला। यभि तपाईं ि ाि भलन ि ाहनुहुन्छ िने मात्र यस फारममा नाम र भमभत लेख्नुहोला।

र्पतईंको नतम:

.....

वमवर्:

.....

कृपयत र्पतईंको स्कू लको नतम लेख्नुहोस्:

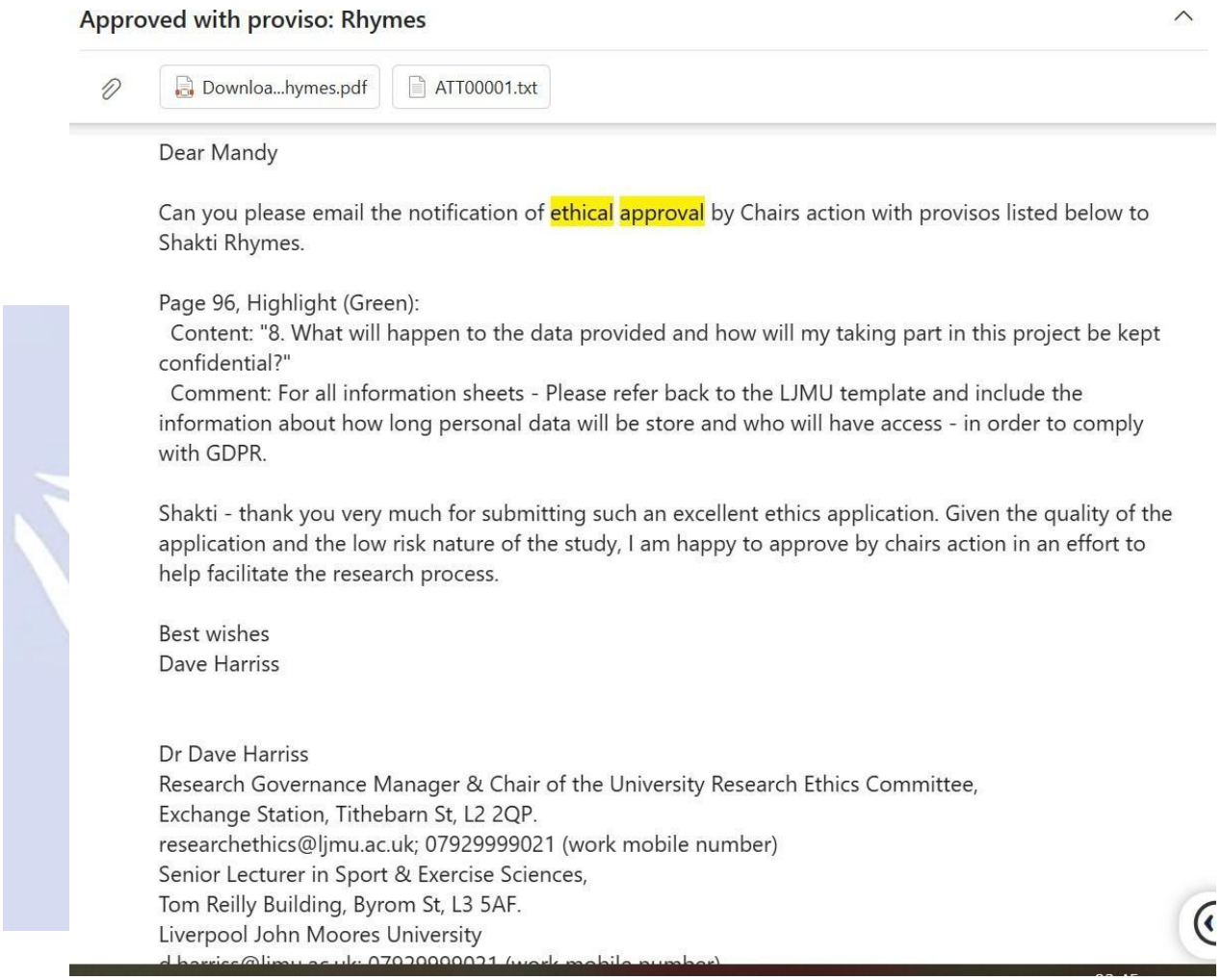
.....

कृपयत कक्षत ११ मत कुन विर्य अध्ययन गर्दै हुनुहुन्छ यहताँ लेख्नुहोस्:

.....

LIVERPOOL JOHN MOORES UNIVERSITY

Appendix R: Ethical Approval Email from Liverpool John moores University



Approved with proviso: Rhymes

Downloa...hymes.pdf ATT00001.txt

Dear Mandy

Can you please email the notification of ethical approval by Chairs action with provisos listed below to Shakti Rhymes.

Page 96, Highlight (Green):
Content: "8. What will happen to the data provided and how will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?"
Comment: For all information sheets - Please refer back to the LJMU template and include the information about how long personal data will be store and who will have access - in order to comply with GDPR.

Shakti - thank you very much for submitting such an excellent ethics application. Given the quality of the application and the low risk nature of the study, I am happy to approve by chairs action in an effort to help facilitate the research process.

Best wishes
Dave Harriss

Dr Dave Harriss
Research Governance Manager & Chair of the University Research Ethics Committee,
Exchange Station, Tithebarn St, L2 2QP.
researchethics@ljmu.ac.uk; 07929999021 (work mobile number)
Senior Lecturer in Sport & Exercise Sciences,
Tom Reilly Building, Byrom St, L3 5AF.
Liverpool John Moores University
d.harriss@ljmu.ac.uk; 07929999021 (work mobile number)

Appendix Q: Parental Consent Form

Study Title:

An Exploration of Students' and Teachers' Experiences of a New Grading System (SEE) in Chitwan District of Nepal

Researcher:

Rhymes Shakti

Liverpool John Moores University

IM Marsh Campus, Faculty of Education,

L17 6BD Email: (Researcher email

address)

Parental Consent for Student Participation

Please read the Participant Information Sheet provided with this consent form. If you are satisfied with the information and agree to allow your child to participate, please tick the boxes below and sign the form.

☐ **1.** I confirm that I have read and understood the information provided about the above study.

☐ **2.** I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study, and any questions have been answered satisfactorily.

☐ **3.** I understand that my child's participation is voluntary and that they may withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason, and this will not affect their rights or schooling.

☐ **4.** I understand that personal information collected during the study will be treated confidentially, and nei ther my child nor their school will be identified in the reporting of the research.

☐ **5.** I give permission for my child to take part in the research activities, including focus group discussions or interviews.

☐ **6.** I understand that the information collected will be handled in accordance with applicable data protection regulations.

Name of Parent/Guardian:

.....

Name of Student:

.....

School Name:

……

Parent/Guardian Email or Telephone Number:

……

Signature of Parent/Guardian:

……

Date:

……

Appendix R: Certificate of Ethical training



CERTIFICATE Of COMPETENCY

Rhymes Shakti has achieved the required standard in

RESEARCH ETHICS TRAINING

PRESENTED BY: Dave Harriss

ON THIS DAY: August 22, 2017

Appendix S: Schedule of Interviews and Focus Group Discussion

Interview schedules for participants in pilot study	**Date of the Schedule Interview dd and FGD's**
School X	02/01/2018
School Y	04/01/2018
Main study data collection process	
FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION WITH STUDENTS AND TEACHERS school A and B	14/09/2019-15/09/2019
FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION WITH STUDENTS AND TEACHERS School c and D	10/09/2019-12/10/2019
Interview District EDUCATION OFFICER	24/09/2019
Central Government Official(CGO)	31/10/2019

Table 12: Schedule of Interviews and Focus Group Discussion

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Appendix T: Table of SEE reformed, implemented, and in pipeline

Reform	Previous system	Current change	Status	Evidence
SLC to SEE	SLC examination	Renamed Secondary Education Examination (SEE)	Since 2016	Government of Nepal, Ministry of Education
Letter grading	Numerical division system	Letter grades introduced	Implemented	NEB Regulations
Theory threshold	No separate threshold	Minimum 35% in theory	Implemented	NEB Examination Guidelines
Provincial papers	Single national compulsory paper	Province-specific compulsory papers	Implemented	NEB SEE Management 2082
Result processing	Centralised marking; 2–3 months	Centre-based marking and faster results	SEE 2082	The Kathmandu Post
Exam monitoring	Broad access for monitors/visitors	Restricted access inside exam halls	Implemented	The Kathmandu Post

Table 13: SEE reformed and implemented

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Proposed reform	Current position	Proposed position	Status	Evidence
National SEE	National Grade 10 exam	Schools conduct Grade 10 exams	Proposed	NEB Guidelines
National board exam	Grades 10 & 12	Grade 12 only	Proposed	NEB Guidelines
School autonomy	Limited school control	Schools manage Grade 10 assessment	Proposed	NEB Guidelines
Local government role	Limited authority	Local level manages Grade 8 exams	Proposed	The Kathmandu Post
Decentralised assessment	NEB-centralised	More local/school assessment	Proposed	The Kathmandu Post

Table 14: SEE reformed in pipeline

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