

From Rights to Reality: Bridging the Gap in Inclusive Examination Policies for Students with Disabilities in Nepal

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Abstract

This study navigates the complex landscape of examination policy and its daily impacts for Students with disabilities (SWDs) in Nepal. Despite Nepal's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the route of inclusive national policies, significant barriers to promoting equitable access to assessment persist. The research draws on a qualitative document analysis to contrast policy demands, institutional practices and implementation challenges against the context of high-stakes testing. It examines gaps between national legislative assurances and the experiences of students with disabilities. The findings highlight critical gaps in infrastructure, teacher preparation and administrative consistency that hinder inclusive practices in examination settings. Based on comparative learnings from India and the United Kingdom, the study outlines a roadmap for reforms consisting of standardization of infrastructure, capacity development and investment in enabling infrastructure. By tracing the analysis within a broader discussion of inclusive education and disability rights the article raises the question of how to close the implementation gap.

Keywords: Inclusive education, Examination accommodations, students with disabilities, assessment equity, Nepal education policy, implementation gap

Introduction

Education is emphasized throughout the world as human right and component of equity, empowerment and sustainable development. The worldwide conventions such as Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2006, and Sustainable Development Goals in 2015, especially goal four on inclusive and equitable quality education for all learners, have demonstrated the promise of accessible, equitable, quality education for all learners. Inclusive education is based on one of its core principles that learners with disability need to be educated in regular learning environments. One of the most prominent features of this support is the provision of inclusive and equitable assessment practices. High-stakes assessments need to be a true demonstration of what students with disabilities know and can do and not a measure in relation to their impairment levels. (Sharma & Deppeler, 2012)

Nepal has endorsed its commitment to inclusive education through both international and national law. Since the ratification of the UNCRPD in 2010 Nepal has acknowledged and committed to international disability rights through its laws. At the national level the Constitution of Nepal (2015) recognizes the right to education prohibiting discrimination based on disability. Nepal also emphasizes inclusive practice within the Act Relating to Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2017) and the National Education Policy (2019) requiring reasonable adjustments to be made including in examination systems (Government of Nepal, 2015, 2017, 2019). The inclusive education policy (2016) outlines that children with disabilities should be provided the opportunity to participate in regular schools and encourages adjustments to education, learning spaces and assessments.

Although there are many forward-thinking policies in place there is still a considerable distance between policy and practice, especially in terms of accommodations for examinations. Research documents and stakeholder reports all highlight how unprepared teachers, infrastructure issues, poorly implemented policies and a lack of administrators' awareness all inhibit the proper delivery of accommodations. (Koirala & Acharya, 2021). These limitations are particularly visible in important national assessments contexts, including the Secondary Education Examination and nationally indicated post-secondary exams, where students with disabilities are met with structural barriers that obstruct them from reflecting learning outcomes.

In comparison, many other countries are making significant progress toward implementing inclusive assessment systems. For example, India and the United Kingdom have implemented substantial provisions such as time allowances, assistive technology allowances, and offering exams in various formats that allow for various disabilities (UNESCO, 2020). Nepal has made policy asserting its desire for this direction, but has not clearly implemented those policies in a consistent and equitable manner. Failure to address these inequities has serious negative impact not only on the academic success of students with disabilities, but also threatens inclusion and social justice in education as a whole.

This study explores how Nepal's assessment policies can be linked to their operationalized versions, specifically focusing students with disabilities. It examines national policies, system impediments and draws from international best practices to propose some options to increase the inclusive assessment in Nepal.

Methodology

This study utilized the qualitative document analysis (QDA) technique to explore inclusive examination policy and practice alignment between policy and implementation among Nepal's students with disabilities. QDA is best applied in policy research as it facilitates systematic identification, appraisal and interpretation of official policy documents and complementary literature (Bowen, 2009; Prior, 2003). This approach offers a non-intrusive and context sensitive way to reveal underlying themes, assumptions and structural constraints related to the practice of inclusive assessment.

Data Sources and Collection

The decision to determine documents was based on relevance related to inclusive assessment, credibility of the source and the connection to Nepal's educational reform context post-2015. A thematic content analysis framework was employed to explore themes, identify gaps between policy and practice and identify possibilities for reform. (Bowen, 2009). Documents were categorized into three primary sources to ensure broad coverage:

Primary Policy Documents. The main legislation and policies in this category are the Constitution of Nepal (2015) , the Act Relating to Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2017) , the National Education Policy (2019) and the School Education Sector Plan (SESP) 2022-2030 . In

addition to the above legislation and policies, it was also useful to refer to functional or administrative guidelines and examination policies regarding the provisions for exam accommodations that were implemented by government authorities such as the National Examination Board (NEB) and Universities

Secondary Academic Sources. This category contained peer-reviewed articles (journal articles and book chapters) and policy documents in the field of inclusive education with a focus on disability rights and assessment systems in Nepal and contexts where there may be comparisons. Major sources were the reports prepared by international agencies including UNESCO, UNICEF and World Bank.

Grey Literature. This encompasses reports from non- governmental and Organizations working for Persons with Disability (e.g., National Federation of the Disabled Nepal), donor-funded project evaluations and credible media coverage. The ground realities and lived experiences of examining accommodations were often best illustrated in these sources (NFDN, 2021).

Results

The results of the qualitative document analysis fell into three key areas of evaluation: (1) the policy mandates related to examination accommodations (2) the practices and challenges related to implementation and (3) the emergent positive practices in some institutions.

Policy Mandates for Examination Accommodations

The legal and policy environment in Nepal demonstrates a formal commitment to inclusive examination for those students with disabilities (SWDs). Foundational legal documents provide a clear direction for equitable access in education and examination. The Constitution of Nepal (2015) starts the journey by establishing the right to non-discrimination under Article 18 and free compulsory basic education (for all children including those with disability) under Article 31. These rights provide a foundation for the state regarding equal opportunity for education, including in examination systems (Government of Nepal, 2015).

Expanding from this base the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2017) makes the notion of inclusive education concrete in its specific legal provisions. The Act defines "reasonable accommodation," (Reasonable Accommodation, n.d.-b) mandates inclusionary formalization and

method of assessment. Requirements to provide accessible formats and appropriate supports to students with disabilities to assess their academic performance, are outlined in sections 2(j), 16 and 17. The Act supports international human rights frameworks, especially the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which Nepal thus far has signed (GoN, 2017).

The National Education Policy (2019) also highlights the state's responsibility to facilitate 'inclusive learning experiences'. It calls for inclusive curriculum and the development of alternative assessment models that accommodate the diversity of learners' needs and abilities. This is a policy vision that seeks to move away from a standardized/conventional/one size fits all model of assessment, by advocating for differentiated pathways in assessment design. (GoN, 2019).

In light of these mandates, examination bodies including the National Examination Board (NEB) and a number of universities have begun to introduce a variety of options for accommodations. These options include additional time (generally 25 to 50 percent), scribes and readers, separate examination space and accessible formats such as Braille or large print question papers. In some contexts, assistive devices of some descriptions are also allowed. Kathmandu University and others have started to move toward institutionalizing some of the accommodations, providing interesting examples of how a required commitment to disability policy can translate into real options for practice. (NFDN, 2021; Kathmandu University, 2023).

While these developments are positive, the actual realization of these policy mandates is irregular and inconsistent across the country. Across regions, enforcement of policy mandates is inconsistent and contingent on the capacity, awareness and geographic location of the institution. The difference between policy intent and implementation on the ground would therefore further obstruct the vision of inclusive education and the future use of frameworks for inclusive education, unless they have solid monitoring mechanisms, a capacity building strategy and sufficient infrastructure in place. Despite Nepal having a good normative environment for inclusive policy it has yet to provide a systematic approach to equity in assessment for students with disabilities

Implementation Practices and Challenges

While Nepal has significantly progressed towards creating an inclusive policy space for education, actual practice of examination accommodations for students with disabilities (SWDs) is still hindered by significant inconsistencies and systematized institutional barriers.

The implementation of accommodations continues to be unevenly distributed across institutions and regions. Access often depends on geographical location, institutional capacity, nature of disability and awareness or discretion of the individual administrator. Schools in urban areas generally possess more supportive structures, while schools in rural areas or those lacking resources tend to lack the capability or intention to effectively use accommodations Koirala & Acharya, 2021; Lamichhane, 2017).

For example, there is a lack of ramps, accessible toilets, and accessible seating arrangements in many examination centers. It can be safely assumed that students with physical and sensory disabilities will experience various kinds of institutional barriers in accessing accommodations. To add insult to injury, poor lighting and poor acoustics make it difficult for students with visual and hearing disabilities. Infrastructural limitations make access look like an unachievable dream despite policy commitments (UNESCO, 2020; Joshi, 2020) Many accommodations are narrow in scope and qualitatively limited. For example, while time and transcribers are the most common form of assistive technology, ideal accommodations for students with learning or cognitive disabilities such as access to assistive technology or alternative formats are rarely available. Additionally, transcribers and readers are often untrained and hence, the terrain to address individual needs is contradictory and inequitable in high-stakes assessments. Students with intellectual or severe disabilities; were the most underserved as specific assessment alternatives for their needs have not been developed (NFDN, 2021; World Bank, 2018).

The administrative processes associated with accessing accommodations are often complex and opaque leading qualified (eligible) students and families to choose not to go through these processes. Furthermore, negative perceptions as well as low expectations held by educators and examiners alike contribute to tokenistic or inconsistent support of students. The combination of these attitudinal and procedural barriers is mutually reinforcing and act to constrain future possibilities for genuine inclusion. (Sharma & Deppeler, 2012; Khanal, 2024).

Nepal's dependency on high-stakes summative assessments (especially the Secondary Education Examination) compounds systemic inequity for SWDs if the lack of accommodations is not corrected. While national policy mandates the development of alternative and continuous assessments, the application of alternative assessment approaches is still fragmentary especially in upper grade levels and with high-stakes national assessments (World Bank, 2018).

Emerging positive practices in selected institutions

A recent article in Online Khabar (Subedi, G, 2025) reports on efforts under the School Education Sector Plan (SESP) 2022–2032 to promote more inclusive and competency-based assessment practices. While some shift in the direction is seen in CAS in lower grades, the application and integration of disability-specific accommodations specifically into mainstream assessment protocols (particularly at higher levels) is much further behind and inconsistent. The gap between intentions of policy and practice highlights the need for a sustained institutional commitment and accountability.

Furthermore in 2025, the National Federation of the Blind, along with advocacy groups, initiated the development of a Policy Brief on Blind-Friendly Assessment. The project is designed to make standardized accommodations such as Braille tests, tactile graphics, computer-based formats that accommodate screen readers, and oral tests replace variable dependence only on scribes. The brief short-term, to be completed by mid-2025, is expected to inform national standards on topics of assessment design, staff training, and grievance redress mechanism as per Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles (Blind Youth Association Nepal, 2025).

Kathmandu University's Disability Support Unit offers standardized examination concessions like trained scribes, assistive technology assistance, and flexible scheduling. These specifically designed services encourage equity and can be used as an example for other higher education providers. However, Tribhuvan University, on the other hand, is confronted with standardizing support by virtue of its size and administrative complexity (Sapkota, J, 2023)

These new practices demonstrate a promising trend toward broader testing in Nepal but remain institution-specific and patchy. Scaling these up via national-level standardization, capacity building, and enforcement is necessary to give equivalent examination access to all SWDs.

Discussion

The results of this study highlight a significant gap between Nepal's policy commitments to inclusive education and the actual practice of providing examination accommodations for students with disabilities. The policies are progressive and made in relation to local requirements and with alignment to international norms but systemic challenges do not allow those policy commitments to be effectively translated into practice.

The Gap Between Policy and Practice

Nepal's national legislation and policies for example: Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2017), the National Education Policy (2019) and the Inclusive Education Policy (2016) mandate inclusive provisions for students with disabilities. However, these mandates continue to be aspirational because there are no enforceable procedures, accountability mechanisms and practical guidelines. For instance, while the National Examination Board (NEB) provides extra time and scribes, there are no government sanctioned protocols for recruiting and training scribes, verifying eligibility for accommodation and assessing the quality of the support received for students with disabilities. (Koirala & Acharya, 2021; Sharma & Deppeler, 2012).

In contrast, country such as the United Kingdom offers detailed frameworks such as the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) which define eligibility, documentation, assistive technology specifications, complaint redress processes and quality assurance (JCQ, 2023). In Nepal this type of documentation does not exist, meaning that institutions have a lot of discretion and can choose to implement inclusivity inconsistently. This gap between policy and practice further undermines the rights of students with disabilities and devalues the intended outcome of inclusive education legislation.

Root Causes of Implementation Challenges

The barriers to inclusive assessment in Nepal arise from a tangled web of structural barriers, implementation gaps and cultural barriers. While policies are well meaning a number of fundamental issues are still evident. Perhaps the most significant barrier is the chronic underfunding of the education sector in Nepal which severely limits the availability of key resources. An inadequately prepared assessment center (especially in regard to rural or remote examination centers) may lack basic ramps, accessible washrooms and seating (and even support

personnel and assistive technologies) leaving nearly impossible Participation and/or environmental barrier resolution if students with disabilities were ever to arrive to these sites(Basnet, 2023).

In addition, there is insufficient capacity development among educators and exam officials. Very few pre-service and in- service teacher education/effectiveness programs have modules on inclusive education or principles like Universal Design for Learning (UDL). As a consequence, most educators/exam administrators and invigilators do not have the theoretical background or practical capacity to accommodate students with disabilities during assessments. According to UNICEF (2022), "fewer than 20 percent of teachers in Nepal believe that they can assist SWDs during examinations". This is clearly an indicator of a system that is not prepared.

Lack of coordination across educational institutions and stakeholders intensifies the problem. There is little collaboration between the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST), the National Examination Board (NEB), the universities and local governments, coordination and collaboration are incoherent. Incoherent governance leads to inconsistent policy implementation followed by parallel or contradictory actions. The absence of a coherent implementation mechanism results in good policies remaining just that -policy without action on the ground. (World Bank, 2018).

Attitudinal barriers caused by social stigma will continue to affect the educational experiences of students with disabilities (SWDs). In particular, disturbing shortfalls in judgment about the abilities of SWDs continue to exist with educators, administrators and peers. Likewise, there continues to be an underlying disbelief in the legitimacy of accommodations and the benefits and allowances that function as barriers to equitable access to and participation. It is not uncommon for educators to have reservation about assistive devices or human support (i.e., readers or scribes) designated for SWDs, as s/he benefits are sometimes perceived as unfair advantages, rather than accommodations that allow for equitable access to learning. Additionally, these views and associated stigma continue to deny legitimacy to the needs of SWDs and lead to exclusion or marginalization in the education system. (Lamichhane, 2017; NFDN, 2021).

In conclusion, the absence of dis-aggregated and detailed data on students with disabilities overly restricts evidence-based planning and accountability. In the absence of dis-aggregated data about how many students accessed an accommodation, what types of accommodations students

accessed or what performance outcomes were achieved across the various categories of disability, policymakers are unable to envisage interventions specific for the targeted categories nor to determine their effectiveness and efficiency. As a result of the absence of relevant data efforts to fairly resource students with disabilities and appropriately analyze potential outcomes from inclusive assessment policies are limited. (UNESCO, 2020)

A Reform Agenda for Inclusive Assessment

In order to close the (policy-action) implementation gap pertain to Nepal's inclusive education policies and the ways in which examination accommodations are implemented a multi-faceted reform proposal must be delineated. The implementation strategy needs to be built on legal accountability, resource commitments, inter-institutional collaborative agenda and cultural change. Examining accommodations for students with disabilities (SWDs) can only be realized through multi level systematic changes otherwise, inclusion will remain a mere cliché.

The first component of any strategy can be the establishment of standardized and enforceable national guidelines on examination accommodations. Nepal's current examinations accommodations process is not standardized (preference is widely used) resulting in numerous inconsistencies. The minimum expectation should include legally binding procedures that clearly define eligibility criteria, types of accommodations, quality standards requirements for support personnel (e.g., readers, transcribers) and grievance processes. Associations from countries such as the United Kingdom and India exemplify models that have established national assessments with central mechanisms such as the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) (Contributors to Wikimedia projects, 2025) in the United Kingdom or the work completed by India's Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) as part of their strategies to enact and implement guidelines for inclusive assessment. (JCQ, 2023; MHRD, 2020).

Investing in capacity building is also vital. Welcoming assessment practices can only be implemented effectively if educators, exam administrators and institutional leaders hold the knowledge and skills to do so. Given the substantial evidence on disability rights, inclusive education and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) compulsory robust training should also be embedded into pre service teacher education and in service professional development. The training for exam support staff and policymakers should also be associated with professional

certification and/or promotion routes so that there are appropriate incentives for higher education institutions to adopt and comply with these socially inclusive actions.

Infrastructure development needs to accompany human capacity. Many of Nepal's examination centers or what have been termed "no spaces" are still physically inaccessible or not able to offer up basic digital planning. Public investment should include improving these spaces to universally accessible standards i.e., building ramps, adaptations for seating, accessible washrooms, assistive devices and inclusive digital formats. There is also the opportunity for mobile support units to address accessibility in remote areas. India's Samagra Shiksha initiative is an impressive example of mobilizing resource and infrastructure reform to address inclusion at scale. (MHRD, 2020).

Diversifying assessment models is another urgent need. The education system in Nepal is based on paper based, summative examinations which may not consider the typical range of learning profile of SWDs. The alternative forms of assessment (continuous assessment systems (CAS) oral assessments or portfolios) could enable students to show their learning in different ways that are appropriate to them and the context. These models are not only based on international best practice but they also align much better with the usual intellectual and communicative strength of many students with disabilities. (UNESCO, 2020).

Reforms should also entail disability support units being established across schools, examination boards and higher education institutions. With a clear focus on coordination of accommodation requests, liaison with families, compliance with the national guidance and the evaluation of the impact of accommodations, these units should be assumed by concerned institutions. For example, Kathmandu University has initiated a model demonstrating and identifying the feasibility and effectiveness for a Nepali context. (Kathmandu University, 2023).

A systematic monitoring and evaluation would be useful for accountability and to promote enhancing practices. Ideally central databases should allow for live dashboards and regular audits this would allow access for decision makers regarding participation, performance and impact of accommodations for SWDs. Without assured data, then it remains problematic to identify implementation neglected gaps and use resources cautiously.

Finally, any shift in structure must continue to engage the public with sustained awareness and advocacy to address the implicit and explicit stigma towards disability, challenging and shifting

societal attitudes towards disability is the foundation and essential to building an inclusive educational culture. National campaigns to disrupt imbalance and inequity know that accommodations do not constitute favoritism but rather denote fairness. It must be emphasized that all learners deserve equal access and right to assessment every bit as much as their peers without disabilities.

Conclusion

This research has documented and highlighted the striking disconnection between Nepal's progressive policies on inclusive education relative to the fragmented and inconsistent, nature of examination accommodations for students with disabilities. Despite aspirational legal frameworks such as the Constitution of Nepal, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, and National Education Policy provide normative frameworks for outcomes. Too often these efforts are challenged by barriers associated with systemic limitations. Key barriers such as infrastructure, educator and examination staff capacity, marginal coordination of institutions, support and sustain their cultural and implicit stigma which undermines the transformative nature of inclusive assessment framework.

The specificities are very minimal in some of those institutions and while there are some potential models like those at Kathmandu University, the overall situation is characterized by unrestricted practices with non-enforceable standards and inclusive practices that continue to leave students with disabilities on the brims, seemingly uninformed of their needs or deprioritized. The current high-stakes, summative assessments are a further marginalizing tension for students with disabilities. Their assessment needs are typically either not understood or deprioritized while students with disabilities cannot afford to ignore them. The situation is not aided by the absence of disaggregated data that allow for accountability & evidence-based decision making.

A practical and sustained reform agenda to bridge the policy-practice gap is required. Standardized and enforceable national guidelines, substantial investment in human or physical resources and support systems being institutionalized need to shine a path forward. Cultural shifts through public awareness and advocacy that positions accommodations as an opening toward educational equity and challenges deficit-based thinking about disability are also required.

In the final analysis, inclusive assessment is not just a technical or administrative issue; it is moral and rights-based. To ensure that all students (regardless of ability) can access participate and be successful with appropriate and equitable assessment protocols. We must have the larger ideals of equity, justice and human dignity realized in educational approaches. A commitment to turning rights into realities will depend not only on design within policy but on the political will, institutional determination and social focus to realize that inclusive education is genuinely inclusive for all.

Implications of The Study

This study has implications at several levels, particularly in relation to educational policy development and institutional assessment practices in Nepal. Although the study findings provided useful insights to help close the gap between policy and practice for students with disabilities (SWDs) they should not be taken to imply that they apply in the same way to all educational settings. The study nevertheless provides evidence-based recommendations that are valid, relevant and timely in the context of policy and institutional reforms undertaken by national and provincial agencies such as the Ministry of Education (MoEST), National Examination Board (NEB) and universities. The study provided evidence-based insights for teacher education programs, disability advocacy organizations and donor-funded education projects that advocate for a more equitable assessment framework aligned with Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

Contribution/s

The first author contributed to the conceptualization, research design, document analysis, draft writing and synthesis of findings from the study. The corresponding author contributed to conceptualization, interpretation of findings and development of analysis framework. The remaining author was involved in the research process, data collection and drafting. All authors collaboratively prepared the final draft of this paper.

Ethical Considerations

This research has followed ethical research practices for social science and education policy studies. As the research utilized only publicly available policy documents, academic sources and secondary data sources there was no interaction with human subjects and thus did not require

approval from an Institutional Review Board (IRB) for this research. However, the research followed codes of practice outlined in the Statistical Act of Nepal (2022) and respected the dignity of all the individuals and organizations addressed in the study and the rights and privacy of these groups were maintained. Care was taken to be clearly represented as sources and not to misinterpret policy policies.

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Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Data Availability Statement

All datasets, policy documents and secondary resources analyzed during this study are publicly available. The key policy documents are accessible through government portals such as the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) and the National Examination Board (NEB). A comprehensive list of sources is provided in the reference list.

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