

Davies, D. (2015) The 'Iron Gate': High-Stakes Assessment at age 16 in Nepal and England, *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2015.1030591>

Introduction

High-stakes educational assessment, usually enacted through large-scale standardised testing, refers to any measurement of student attainment which carries significant consequences (either positive or negative) for the students, their teacher(s) and/or their educational institution (Herman and Haertel 2005). Final examinations at school leaving age tend to fall into this category; two such examples are the School Leaving Certificate (SLC) in Nepal and the General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE) in England, both taken by students at around the age of 16. The SLC is often referred to by Nepali people as the 'iron gate', since it controls access to higher secondary education; further technical training; careers such as those in the Gorkha regiments of Indian or British armies; and ultimately to universities. Following recent legislation, it is not possible to obtain a driving licence in Nepal without a School Leaving Certificate, making the SLC effectively a passport to adult life. The stakes are perhaps not quite so high for students in England taking the GCSE, although they need grades of C or above in English, Mathematics and Science to train for teaching and a set of five or more 'pass' grades (C or above) is generally required for access to higher secondary education and thence to university. Schools are also ranked in national and regional league tables according to their students' performance in GCSEs; since 2010 this ranking has been based on the percentage achieving C grades or above in a suite of 'academic' subjects known as the 'English Baccalaureate' (Department for Education 2010). In Nepal, schools are not currently subject to ranking in public league tables by SLC results, yet comparisons are drawn between those of different types (e.g. public, private) and locations (e.g. urban, rural).

In both countries, these forms of high-stakes testing have come under criticism in recent years. In Nepal, low SLC pass rates, particularly in English and mathematics, have been of concern (Bhatta 2008) and, although Nepal does not participate in the international Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) or Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), 'there is evidence that Nepali students consistently rank poorly in mathematics and science by international standards' (op. cit. 18). England too has been gripped by 'PISA panic' since its exit from the top 20 ranked education systems following the 2012 tests (PISA 2013); however this follows a much longer debate about whether rising pass rates from 1986 to 2012 represent improving standards or so-called 'grade inflation' resulting from successively easier GCSE examinations. Such has been the scale of concern in the popular press and UK government that the then Secretary of State for Education announced a series of reforms to the examinations in June 2013 to 'restore public confidence' (Gove 2013), including the testing of advanced problem-solving skills in mathematics and science, and the replacement of most continuous assessment by linear, externally marked end-of-course exams. In Nepal too, the pressure for reform of the largely recall-based SLC is growing, despite the introduction of limited problem-solving elements over recent years. So, although the concerns and proposed solutions are different, there are sufficient similarities between the situations facing high-stakes assessment in the two countries – one a member of the G8 club of powerful economies whilst the other

ranks 157th by Human Development Index (HDI) (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) 2013) - to make a comparative study meaningful. Through this comparison I seek to address the following questions: 'How is high-stakes assessment at age 16 in Nepal perceived by students, teachers and officials; what are the drivers for reform and how do these compare with the case of the GCSE examination in England?'

Educational assessment in Nepal

Nepal, a small landlocked Himalayan country bordered by China (Tibet) to the north and India to the south, has never been formally colonised, yet its close relationship with the British Raj - subsequently formalised with independent India in 1950 - continues to 'shape deeply the country's understanding of its role and place in the world' (Carney 2011, 3). This is exemplified by the SLC examination, borrowed from India in 1934 and based upon the English School Certificate (which was itself replaced in England by the General Certificate of Education (GCE) 'O' (Ordinary) level exams in 1951, by which time India was independent so did not follow suit). Before 1934 there appears to have been no national system of educational assessment, indeed limited access to formal education under the Rana regime (1846-1951) (Parajuli 2012). Towards the end of the Rana period there was growing government interest in the Gandhian 'basic education' approach, which could be regarded as a postcolonial model emphasising rural development and continuous skills-based assessment; however following the establishment of a 'modern' state in 1951 Nepal cast its educational gaze once more towards the West (*ibid.*). The neo-colonial influence on Nepali education can be seen in its structure, with five years of primary education being followed by three years of 'lower secondary' (the equivalent of Key Stage 3 from ages 11 to 14 in England), two years of secondary (equivalent to Key Stage 4) and two optional years of 'higher secondary' ('sixth form' in England). However, the School Sector Reform Plan 2009–2015 (Government of Nepal Ministry of Education 2009) proposes reorganisation into two phases of education, with secondary education for all continuing to the end of Grade 12, paralleling the raising of the school leaving age to 18 in England in 2013.

Although the proposed changes to secondary education in Nepal may well see the demise of the SLC, at present it occupies a central position in the assessment framework. Whilst Lohani, Singh, and Lohani (2010: 366) found evidence of classroom-based continuous assessment by teachers, using 'written tests, oral tests, classroom work, homework, and classroom questions', each school is required by the Ministry of Education to conduct examinations for every grade three times per year: at the end of the first term, at the mid-point and end of the school year in March-April (*ibid.*). These are supplemented by school and district-level exams at the end of Grade 5 (primary) and Grade 8 (lower secondary) respectively, all of which are designed to prepare students for the national SLC at Grade 10 (Bista and Carney 2004). In a highly centralised system the Office of Controller of Examinations (OCE) is charged by the Ministry of Education with setting examinations in a range of subjects (6 of which are compulsory); administering the distribution of papers to 786 district examination centres (many in remote mountainous areas); ensuring the security of papers and invigilators whilst 547,000 students travel to these centres to take the exams; collection, storage marking and moderation of scripts; publication of results and issuing of certificates (Government of Nepal Ministry of Education 2014). This represents a significant investment on the part of the government to ensure that the SLC retains its

reputation within the country as a fair, rigorous and reliable qualification. However, as Baird and Black (2013) argue, the need to keep examination papers secure (as is the case for both SLC and GCSE) potentially reduces both validity and reliability, since it precludes pre-testing. The research reported below sought to elicit from a small sample of students, teachers, academics and government officials the extent to which the SLC continues to be respected, given the challenges it currently faces.

Methodology

Applying Bray and Thomas' multilevel comparative model (1995) this study is located within level 2 ('countries') in the geographic/location dimension since, whilst Nepal is both a country and a state, England is a country located within a larger state (the UK). In relation to Bray and Thomas' second dimension (demographic) this is an age-group comparison since predominantly 16 year-olds take both the SLC and GCSE examinations, though some of the analysis will relate to both gender and ethnic (caste) groups. Within the third dimension of this model (aspects of education and society) the study applies to an assessment subset of the 'curriculum' strand, since as has been widely noted, the enacted curriculum tends to be shaped by assessment practices (Strickland and Strickland 1998, Joughin 2010).

In order to address my first research question: 'How is high-stakes assessment at age 16 in Nepal perceived by students, teachers and officials?' I conducted individual interviews with Nepali teachers ($n = 7$) and group interviews with Grade 11 students ($n = 15$) and teachers ($n = 15$) at a rural, government village 3-19 school in the Annapurna foothills of the Pun-Magar region of western Nepal during March and April 2013 (the SLC exam period). The group samples represent the total populations of teachers and Grade 11 students in the school. The sample of teachers interviewed individually was self-selecting; all were volunteers drawn from the group interview, all were male (representative of the gender ratio of teaching staff in the school as a whole) and had been in service for between 5 and 35 years, with a median experience of 16 years. Their subject areas included English, Nepali, mathematics, computing, economics, accounting and social studies. Whilst these data constitute a school-level case study – which is not intended to represent other schools in Nepal and whose findings cannot therefore be extrapolated – they have been supplemented by interviews with a former researcher in educational assessment at Tribhuvan University (now an educational consultant with Asian Development Bank) and four officials in the Office of Controller of Examinations (OCE) to provide a Nepal-wide picture. Interview schedules are in the appendix. All interviews were conducted, recorded, transcribed and analysed by one researcher. In the findings below, quotes from interviews were selected that most clearly represented the issues that were being raised by a number of respondents.

My second research question: 'What are the drivers for reform of SLC?' was addressed partly from interviews with OCE staff (see above) and partly from a review of Nepal government reports (e.g. GoNMoE 2009) and other SLC-related literature (e.g. Bista *et al.* 2004, Bhatta 2005 – see below). The third question: 'How do the SLC drivers for reform compare with the case of the GCSE examination in England?' was addressed through desk-based research, trawling UK government documentation, press reports and academic literature using the search term 'GCSE reform' and restricting the time-frame to May 2010 onwards (the period of the current administration). Relevant passages were subjected to content analysis, from which key issues appearing in two or more sources

were drawn. Familiarity with the issues surrounding GCSE examinations in England as a UK-based educator and parent – together with the emphasis of the study being on the SLC with the GCSE comparison as a minor component – led me to deem it unnecessary to collect primary data (e.g. interviews with pupils and teachers) in England. Whilst this omission may have weakened the comparative element of the study, nevertheless at a macro-level the political and societal drivers for reform in both countries can be discerned from government announcements and publications.

The approach I adopted to comparison of the above data has been guided by Bereday's four-step method of comparative analysis (1964), which involves the stages of description, evaluation, juxtaposition and simultaneous comparison. These last two steps have involved identifying the extent and reasons for commonalities and differences between the Nepali and English contexts, examining causes at work and the relationship between those causes. Care has been taken to avoid 'illusory commonality' (Ragin 1987, 47), whilst acknowledging the danger of ethnocentricity (Phillips and Schweisfurth 2007), particularly in relation to interpretation of the language used by Nepali students, teachers and officials.

Findings

Description

The origins of the SLC as a colonial import via India were confirmed by one of the officials interviewed at the Office for the Control of Examinations:

Historically this examination system came from India. In India they used the British system; from India it came to Nepal. All processes are still based on those systems. There are little changes but mainly they are the same. (OCE official)

This sense of system continuity over many years, with its associated comforts and frustrations, was a recurring theme in many of the interviews. However, the SLC and other summative examinations are not the only forms of educational assessment occurring in Nepali classrooms, where teachers reported employing various – albeit fairly traditional – forms of continuous monitoring of students' learning:

I write down on the blackboard the main topic of the subject matter and I start to lecture this and the students will copy what I write and they listen and sometime I ask the questions. 'Do you understand? If you don't understand please ask me.' (Teacher of accounting and economics)

The use of classroom questioning was supplemented by marking student written work and the occasional use of short tests in the practice of other teachers questioned, echoing the findings of Lohani et al (2010).

The multifaceted role of the OCE in running a nationwide assessment system such as SLC was emphasised in the interviews with officials:

We in this office, based on the brief provided by the Curriculum Development Centre, prepare the questions, conduct the examinations, train the teachers, prepare some guidelines for the evaluation systems and make some analysis of the results. (OCE official)

The clear impression was given that the OCE is sufficiently occupied keeping the whole system working effectively, without being additionally charged with introducing reforms. These roles are set out in greater detail on the OCE website:

- Develop a National System of assessment and standardized testing.
- Establish a strong system of analyzing result and feeding this information back to school.
- Improve the quality of test papers and ensuring reliability in marking.
- Develop the student performance and curriculum materials-based test items.
- Manage time-bound examinations, results, and awarding certificates to SLC graduates.
- Conduct research activities related to assessment and examinations.
- Systematize the accreditation of Examiner, Head Examiner, and Question Setter.
- Start the decentralized system of SLC Examinations activities. (Government of Nepal Ministry of Education Office for the Controller of Examinations 2014)

The above gives the impression of a highly-centralised approach to examination operation and regulation. The student requirements in relation to the SLC were specified by the Deputy Controller of Examinations:

All students need to attend in eight subjects – six core subjects (Nepali, Mathematics, English, Science, Social Studies, Health, Population and Environment Education) and two optional subjects (depending on what the school can provide). We have subjective types of test items, and the students are required to write the answers in books we provide to them ... students must pass in all eight subjects and the pass mark is 32%

By contrast to the ‘official’ version outlined above, the group of students interviewed appeared somewhat unsure as to the list of subjects they had been required to take for their previous year’s SLC:

The subjects are math, English, science, Nepali, social, population, economic, accounts, computer, optional math. The four subjects we have to do just two; the subjects economic, account, computer and optional math we have to choose just any two. (Group interview, Grade 11 students)

The group of teachers elaborated on the marks allocated to each subject and the different categories of pass students can achieve, although interestingly they appeared to include subjects to which neither the OCE nor the students had referred:

Actually eight subjects for full marks; but some subjects are combined for 100 marks, like health, environment, physical... two or three subjects are combined to make 100 mark paper. So anyway for SLC examination they

take the exam for 800 full marks... You have to pass all the subjects. 32 to 44, below 45% that is third division. 45 to 59 that is second division, 60 to below 80 is first division, above 80 is distinction. (Group interview, teachers)

The pass mark of 32% appears low, but is perhaps a reflection of the requirement for students to exceed this level in all eight subjects taken to 'pass' the SLC overall. The nature of the examinations appears to differ slightly between subjects; not all are entirely reliant on traditional pencil-and-paper tests:

In second optional subjects we have practical examination as well, and in core compulsory subjects, in English, in Health, Population and in Science... We have three kinds of speaking test, the first is interview, the second is speaking on a given topic, the third is interpreting pictures, and all these test items are based on the language content taught in grade 10. (Former researcher, Tribhuvan University)

The administration of these speaking tests must prove an additional challenge for the OCE, given the requirement for working educational technology to be present in all test centres:

'In the speaking test a tape recorder is played and the students are given some questions based on the tape played and they have to solve their problems for 15 marks. Sometimes pictures are given to them and they have to describe them.' (Teacher of English)

The inclusion of speaking tests is nevertheless an encouraging feature of the SLC language examinations, since it emphasises the functional use of English rather than merely its academic study. Students interviewed were understandably shy in their use of spoken English, so the requirement to practise for SLC – assuming we accept the neo-colonial rationale for fluency in this international language – appears to be a positive example of assessment influencing curriculum. Further examples of different question types in the English examination were provided by one of the teachers:

Some are subjective questions, some are objective questions. In an objective question, multiple choice and filling the blanks... Moral questions (involve) reading texts, which cover 40% of marks. There are four passages they have to read. Two are from the textbook (15 marks); that part is not hard for them because they already saw that text. There are two unseen texts (25 marks); they have to read the text and do the activity below that (Teacher of English)

It is clear from the majority of interviews that, whilst there are higher-order questions in some SLC examinations requiring students to interpret unseen texts and use higher-order thinking skills, most involve memorisation and recall. This results in teachers preparing students intensively through revision and repetition:

In SLC exam our teachers prepare (us), like they take more extra classes... they teach more extra questions from practice book. (Group interview, Grade 11 students)
The first priority is practice. The first objective is knowing by practising. They can memorise to pass the test. (Teacher of mathematics)

Practice and memorisation rather than the development of understanding and interpretation skills appear to be seen by both teachers and students as the requirements for success in most SLC examinations. A typical example of a question requiring recall is given below:

State Newton's Law of Gravitation. (Compulsory Science Sample Paper)

This is a feature of many countries' examination systems, as noted in the analysis of results from TIMSS (Martin *et al* 2012). Such is the continuity and likelihood of repetition over time in the SLC that one teacher recommended the purchase of past papers and provided specific advice on how to answer each type of question:

I tell to all the students to buy; there is a questions collection they can find in the market. Before three months ago we put last year's questions; if this question comes you have to do this, this, this. (Teacher of computing)

Overall, the SLC was regarded by teachers interviewed as an assessment system that is sufficiently predictable for any student to be able to pass, given sufficient coaching and preparation. Effort rather than ability were emphasised by more than one staff member:

If they think properly they can do the SLC in all subjects. If they didn't work hard they didn't do well. (Teacher of social studies)

Evaluation

The purpose of the evaluation stage in Bereday's model (1964, see above) is to try and gain an understanding of why things are as they are, rather than to pass judgement on a particular educational policy. However, it would appear from the data collected in Nepal and the literature reviewed that the School Leaving Certificate is an examination that, although it commands widespread acceptance within the country, is in need of reform to meet future requirements for an internationally-recognisable qualification. The teachers interviewed took a compliant attitude towards their statutory duties to implement the SLC:

But for Nepal's government SLC is a national examination and we have to do it. (Teacher of mathematics and computing)

This could be because the type of examination that the SLC represents is deeply embedded within the Nepali education system, so appears to be the 'natural order of things' to which alternatives have not been considered. According to the former researcher interviewed, the bureaucratic way in which the examination has been conducted over many years has also made it appear to be of high quality:

The nature of assessment that operates right from grade 1 until they leave the university is basically the same... and what is built into that system is anonymity and randomness that create the impression of rigour. (Former researcher, Tribhuvan University)

Perhaps because they had become socialised into the approach to assessment of which the SLC is a part, or perhaps because they had been successful in the previous year's SLC, the group of students interviewed appeared to regard the examination positively:

I think it's a very good way to link with grade 11 and 12. It's a national examination. In Nepal when we want to do some work we have to pass SLC and if we want to do some training we have to pass SLC examination.
(Group interview, Grade 11 students)

This sense of a national, centralised system of assessment and its high-stakes nature as 'the iron gate' appeared to command respect from the students. However, they did recognise that the extensive use of questions requiring recall meant that it was possible to succeed merely through memorisation rather than understanding of the subject matter:

But in mathematics and accounting most of the questions they ask are from the book. (Group interview, Grade 11 students)

The assumption that most SLC examinations can be passed through hard work alone appears to account in the students' minds for the higher performance of pupils in private schools. It was argued that such pupils would be advantaged simply because their parents – for whom private education represents a financial investment - would put greater pressure on them to memorise material more thoroughly:

And the other one: the parents are more aware about their children's education and they pay more attention because they pay for it. (Group interview - Grade 11 students)

Indeed, it was claimed by one of the OCE officials that having a memory-based system of examination favours private schools of the 'crammer' variety, which thereby constitute a vested interest in keeping the examination unchanged:

What happens in our country is we provide students with marks, and most of the private schools they just make their students recall the things in the textbook... I claim that the students from public schools are more creative. This year we changed the test items in Social Studies, and most of the private schools they complained because they were not from the textbook.
(OCE official)

So there appears to be an inbuilt resistance to change in the nature of the SLC, since at present those with influential voices within Nepal are advantaged by questions framed in a way that tests 'textbook knowledge' rather than challenging students to

demonstrate some of the ‘creativity’ which the OCE official above believes to have been less stifled by state schools than those in the private sector. Another advantage experienced by privately-educated pupils relates to their habitual medium of instruction:

And the next one is: in private school teaching instruction is in English except one Nepali subject, that’s why they are better in English. And then in government school, public school teaching instruction - except in English - in other subjects are in Nepali, and in science and mathematics the terms are in English so they find hard. (Group interview - Grade 11 students)

According to the former researcher, the use of English in all subject areas constitutes the main reason for the rise in private education in Nepal, since to be examined in a language pupils have studied throughout their school career confers a clear advantage (SLC papers are bilingual, but English is a core subject). This has led to partial privatisation of some state education:

This issue of language also has to be linked with the issue of private and public schools, because of the ‘superiority’ – quote unquote - of the private schools, which is primarily based on their using English, so a lot of public schools in Nepal now have English as a medium of instruction right from grade 1, and you would also come across a public school that would have a privatised section where you pay a fee for English instruction, and a section which is free in Nepali. (Former researcher, Tribhuvan University)

There is, nevertheless, some evidence of critique of the style of examination in the SLC and some evidence of a broadening of the approach used. When asked whether they considered the SLC a good way to assess pupil performance in their subject, several of the teachers expressed doubts:

SLC is not the way to check their knowledge; we have other exams too. It is best to check their abilities by other ways, by questioning, by interviewing. (Teacher of social studies)

In my opinion other skills like listening, speaking and other behavioural knowledge should be tested also. (Teacher of Nepali)

These teachers clearly perceived the narrowness of SLC examination questions as compromising its potential validity as an assessment tool. Similar sentiments have prompted some minor reforms in the system, including the introduction of questions requiring the application of knowledge (e.g. ‘Name the type of defect of vision shown in the diagram. What type of lens can be used to treat the defect and why?’) and practical or oral elements into some papers (see above). However, the introduction of teacher marking on practical tasks has led to pressures on the integrity of the system owing to increased pupil pressure, according to one official:

But the problem in the practical is that students expect their teachers to give them full marks. (OCE official)

In computing, the relaxation of the ‘strict’ examination conditions to facilitate practical assessment in a laboratory environment has also led to accusations of unfair practice on the part of some students:

In papers they can ask to their friends ‘what is the answer’ so sometimes they pass by cheating. (Teacher of mathematics and computing)

Perhaps the most significant inhibiting factor on new approaches to assessment within the SLC however is the criticism from private schools, who are less able to control the outcomes for their pupils if test items become less predictable or requiring higher-order thinking skills:

But a few students and teachers complained that this new approach – they are used to a different style of questions. They are suffering now; they cannot get a good score on this new style, so it’s a debate. (OCE official)

So despite its evident shortcomings as a national examination system there appears to be an inbuilt resistance to change in the SLC, which tends to mute criticisms and maintain a complicity in the status quo.

Juxtaposition

When juxtaposing the attitudes towards the SLC in Nepal with those towards GCSE examinations in England we observe some superficial differences in the scale and nature of public criticism, yet some underlying similarities in the assumptions about assessment underpinning such criticism. Whilst in Nepal, the principle objections to SLC from schools and parents appear to be voiced when changes are made, there appears to be constant pressure for change in GCSE exams. So, according to one OCE official:

When we heard those complaints, they are complaining just because they are fearing that their students are getting lower marks this year. (OCE official)

Contrast this with the situation in England, where increasing dissatisfaction with the continuously-assessed coursework elements of GCSE examinations (Roberts and Gott 2006, QCA 2005) led to their replacement in 2010 by ‘controlled assessments’ taking place during lesson time under quasi-examination conditions. In turn, these are being phased out in favour of linear GCSE courses culminating in final examinations at the end of two years’ study (Gove 2013), representing a wholesale change in the structure of the qualification. Admittedly, these changes have been driven by politicians rather than parents or students, although they have been supported by elements of the British press, claiming to speak for these constituencies (e.g. Levy 2013). There is evidence that teachers in England have tended to support the use of coursework (Bullock et al. 2002, Marshall 2011), whilst having lower levels of confidence in the reliability of GCSE assessment than its Advanced-level counterpart taken at age 17-18 (Chamberlain 2013). Studies have indeed found marking errors (ibid.) and inherent reliability problems in the modularity of the GCSE qualification (Bramley and Dhawan 2013), however calls to report uncertainty in individual results (Bradshaw and Wheeler 2013) risk further undermining public confidence.

Whilst a surface analysis might conclude that the system pressure in Nepal is against change, whilst that in England favours it, we need to look more closely at the nature of change being introduced. The small changes to SLC in Nepal have been to diversify the types of assessment used to gain a more valid picture of student achievement, whereas those proposed in England are essentially in the opposite direction; towards a single type of end-of-course written examination, administered by a single examination board for each subject. Thus the proposed changes in Nepal might be characterised as progressive in that they are moving towards a broader range of assessment tasks in keeping with international trends, whereas those in England are regressive in that they hark back to an earlier, less diverse form of testing through final examination. If we view the two situations in this way it could be argued that the system pressures – against reform in Nepal and for reform in England – are actually in the same, regressive direction. What appears to cause the greatest outcry is when the ‘goalposts’ are perceived to have shifted, as was the case in the 2012 GCSE English examination, where direct intervention by the Secretary of State for Education resulted in changed grade boundaries and greater failure rate, resulting in many schools challenging the results and threatening legal action (Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) 2012).

Simultaneous comparison

This article argues that one feature shared between Nepali and English schooling systems is the central and growing importance of high-stakes testing in order to grade student performance, compare schools with each other and control access to higher education. This echoes international trends:

‘Large-scale achievement testing is one of the most heavily used instruments in today’s accountability-driven policy toolbox. Debates about the value and uses of such testing overwhelm all other topics of debate about how to improve schools.’ (Leithwood 2004, 364)

The form of these high-stakes examinations at age 16 currently differ, with the GCSE in England aiming to assess the practical application as well as the acquisition of academic knowledge, whilst the SLC primarily focuses on recall:

‘The tests are based on textbook contents and emphasize students’ ability to reproduce information from the textbook, rather than to demonstrate knowledge and skills and apply them to solve problems.’ (Lohani et al 2010, 366)

However, in practice the two may be converging, with the move towards single end-of-course examinations in England involving greater factual content requiring recall and the introduction of practical and oral elements in the SLC. One of the significant differences however is in the pass-rates, where Nepali students appear to be performing poorly by comparison with those in England, where 60.2% of pupils in state schools achieved at least five GCSEs in 2013 (Department for Education 2013). In Nepal, pass rates for ‘regular’ students fluctuated between 38 and 68% in the period 2004-13, with a period between 2008-10 when they were significantly higher than the mean of 45% (which may have been due to political instability leading to weaker security of papers and more flexible marking). They exhibited a downward trend from 2011, arriving at 42% in 2013. However, the overall picture over the past 20 years is for random fluctuation rather than trend.

The above comparison is problematic, since the pass rates SLC are for the total of eight subjects taken, whilst GCSE pass rates have fallen in England for the last two years after consecutive rises from 1988 to 2011 (DfE 2013), partly because of the introduction of the English Baccalaureate qualifying subjects (see above) and partly because of shifting grade boundaries. In England both falling and rising pass rates give rise to moral panic in the popular press every August, since the former suggests ‘falling standards’ whilst the latter is taken as a sign of ‘grade inflation’. In Nepal it may be that the ‘iron’ gate-keeping function of the SLC requires pass rates to remain low to restrict access to scarce educational resources at higher levels. This appears to have a discriminatory effect on students in rural schools (such as the sample interviewed in this study):

‘The national School Leaving Certificate (SLC) exam reinforces these inequalities by acting as a gatekeeper. For many years, a state-mandated cap on the number of students who passed the SLC effectively prevented most rural students from achieving the upward social mobility associated with passing the SLC.’ (Shields and Rapplee 2008, 268)

The students interviewed suggested that the urban-rural divide may not be consistent, but that any discrepancy in pass rates could be explained by increased parental support in urban schools (many of them were boarders from remote communities):

Not all, just a few schools they do, because schools that are in city or town their parents give more focuses on education. (Group interview - Grade 11 students)

There is no equivalent urban-rural divide in GCSE results – indeed until relatively recently students in rural areas outperformed their inner-city counterparts - however the Chief Inspector of Schools in England (OFSTED 2013) has highlighted low educational attainment in relatively impoverished coastal towns. There is however gender and ethnic disparity in pass rates in both countries. Whilst in England girls outperform boys in humanities, languages and science by up to eight percentage points (DfE 2013), in Nepal it is the boys who score more highly, exceeding girls’ pass rates in 2005 by around nine per cent (Bhatta 2005). Ethnic disparities exist in both countries, with a gap between SLC pass rates of around 70% for the Newar ethnic/caste group and 39% for Dalits in 2005 (ibid.), whilst in England in 2006 around 70% of Chinese students gained five or more GCSEs including English and Mathematics, whilst the rate for pupils of Black Caribbean origin was 33% (DfE 2013). In England, most pupils from ethnic minorities live in urban areas, whilst in Nepal the Newar group tend to occupy the Kathmandu valley whilst other groups are scattered across the country. The gender gap appears to be both ethnically and geographically-linked, with girls from Muslim background disproportionately affected:

In the South there is a higher Muslim population and the gender gaps are very high in the Terai region. (former researcher, Tribhuvan University)

In both countries, the private sector tends to outperform public schools in examination results, although comparisons are made difficult in the case of England since many pupils in private schools take international GCSE exams (iGCSEs) rather than the standard GCSE (DfE 2013). In Nepal the differences in pass rates are significant (see

above), although this does not necessarily indicate the higher quality of private education:

... international discourses prioritising issues of usefulness and relevance in education have led to the explosive growth of an (often low quality) private schooling sector. (Carney, Bista, and Agergaard 2007: 3)

Although many of the smaller providers of private education in Nepal may indeed be of poor quality, their relative success in SLC examinations owing to their emphasis upon taking multiple past papers and repetition of questions from previous years has led increasingly to public schools being viewed as ‘inferior educational institutions attended only by the poorer segments of society.’ (Bhatta 2008, 18). This then tends to concentrate resources still further in the private sector, which also further stacks the geographical factors against rural populations:

‘As in many parts of South Asia, the best teachers and resources are found in private schools, along with students from middle- and upper-class families. The overwhelming majority of these private institutions are located in large urban centres such as Kathmandu, and thus their expansion reproduces both class and geographic inequalities. Moreover, many private schools are English-medium, which give their students a further advantage over their public-school counterparts in both SLC exams and the job market.’ (Shields & Rappleye 2008, 272)

The presence of a private sector in England also has a distorting effect on the educational market place, however its impact is being reduced to an extent by the growth in an increasing diversity of publicly-funded secondary education, such as ‘free-schools’ and ‘academies’ (DfE 2010), which enjoy freedom from local authority control and can set their own curricula and entrance requirements. This emerging free-market has led to greater disparities between GCSE pass-rates for different types of state schools than between the private and public sectors.

Conclusion

In comparing the role played by two high-stakes tests for pupils aged 16 – the SLC and GCSE examinations – in their respective countries I have found several underlying factors at work. One of these is public attitude towards the examinations, including views of students, teachers, academics and government. Whilst superficially the pressures for reform appear to be different, closer examination suggests that students tend to prefer the status quo since it provides greater predictability of form, content and outcome, whereas teachers and academics tend to opt for greater validity in the assessment process (wishing to broaden the scope of SLC exams or retain coursework in GCSEs). Politicians and the general public appear to favour regressive forms of assessment, resulting in the continuity of recall-based SLC tests in Nepal and the restless drive for reform of what are seen as ‘soft’ options at GCSE level in England. However, this popular pressure towards ‘traditional’ types of written examination may, paradoxically, disadvantage both countries in the types of international assessment represented by TIMSS and PISA, since:

Setting examinations with short, unconnected items is problematical if you want to test higher order thinking skills of synthesis, application of knowledge from

one area of a course to another and evaluation of the underlying themes and methods of a subject (Baird and Black 2013: 11).

Another similarity between these two forms of 'iron gate' is their unfairness to disadvantaged groups: girls, publicly-educated students and those from rural areas or particular low-status ethnic/caste groups in Nepal by comparison with boys, children in depressed coastal towns and some urban ethnic minorities in England. In order to function as effective gateways to opportunity both examinations require reform to minimise this inequality of opportunity. If a high-stakes test is to fulfil any useful role in a modern state it is to enable those students, from whatever background, with the greatest potential to gain access to the further educational resources needed to realise that potential for the benefit of the national economy. It also cannot afford to 'write off' large sections of the population and hence limit their productive potential through the stigma of 'failure'.

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Appendix

Group interview schedule (Grade 11 students)

1. Please say your age and what you are studying
2. I want to know about your examinations at school. I especially want to know about the School Leaving Certificate – SLC which you took in grade 10. Can someone tell me about the SLC – how many subjects, what subjects, anything you want to tell me.
3. So everybody here, you all passed SCL. Was it hard, was it difficult to pass SLC?
4. How did your teachers prepare you for the exam?
5. Do you think the SLC tests your memory or your understanding?
6. I was reading about the SLC that the private schools in Nepal do better than the government schools. Do you think that's true?
7. Why do you think?
8. I was also reading about SLC that students in government schools in the cities – in Pokhara, Kathmandu – they do better than students in rural areas. Do you think this is true?
9. How many of you want to go to university?
10. And what about your friends who didn't pass the SLC, what do they do?
11. Do you think SLC is a good way to test who is going to go to grade 11?

Group interview schedule (teachers)

1. What examinations are there in the Nepali system?
2. When did your school start holding examinations for every grade – since the school was started?
3. And the government says you have to have local exams, and district, and national?
4. So the examinations they are taking now – is this mid-year or final?
5. Are the pupils in the school the same caste, or different castes?
6. For the local examinations, do you write those in the school – each teacher writes their own exam paper?
7. It is all based on a national curriculum – you have a national curriculum set by the government you follow?
8. What happens to your students who fail the SLC?

Interview schedule (teachers)

1. For how long have you been a teacher?
2. What subject(s) do you teach?
3. What grades do you teach?
4. Can you tell me about your teaching methods?
5. How do you find out what your students are learning?
6. How often do you test them?
7. What do you do for the students who are not doing well – not passing the tests; how do you help them to improve?
8. Do you prepare students for the School Leaving Certificate (SLC) Examinations?
9. How do you prepare them?
10. Is it hard for your students to pass the SLC?
11. Do you think the SLC is a good way to assess students?
12. If not, what would be a better way?

Interview schedule (former researcher)

1. Do rural pupils face disadvantage in the SLC; if so why?

2. Are there language differences in the country that might account for different SLC success rates?
3. Is there a gender divide in SLC pass rates; if so why?
4. In your opinion does the SLC still prioritise recall?
5. I've heard SLC described as the 'iron gate'; what does this mean?
6. It seems there's a game being played, and everyone knows the rules?
7. How are comparisons with PISA and TIMMS driving change?

Interview schedule (officials)

1. Please identify your role within the Office of Controller of Examinations
2. From the government perspective, can you tell me when the SLC started and how it has developed up until now?
3. Who is involved in deciding upon what the SLC will look like? Government? Schools? Universities? Employers?
4. Has the SLC changed over the years – if so, how?
5. What impact do you think the SLC has on the education system in Nepal? Does it advantage or disadvantage certain schools or groups of students?
6. What do you consider the main strengths and weaknesses of the SLC at present?
7. Are there any plans for future changes to the SLC? If so, how will it change?