

Addressing Informal Skill Learners' Challenges in Skill Test in Nepal

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Abstract

In Nepal, more than eighty percent learners gain skills through work and experiences. The informal sector is dominant in the nation. If the skills acquired by the work and experiences are accredited through the testing authority, underemployment and underpayment can be addressed and decent employment and gainful income assured. The recognition of the informally learned skill will transform the path for the formal stream. Despite having the benefits of recognition of the prior learning and establishment of testing authority for forty-five years, the number of the informal skills learners appearing for the accreditation is not encouraging. In this context, this paper explains the challenges of the informal skill learners that encounter during the accreditation of their skills through the National Skill Testing Board. I came up with the qualitative research with seven participants, including informal skill learners and testing authority officials. As the informal skill learners explore the lack of information, awareness and orientation of the skill test system, the information provided must be clear, short, user friendly, precise and free from complexity. Similarly, the testing authority and informal skill learners shared that the skill-testing certificates are less valued by the employers during the recruitment.

Keywords: *Informal Skill Learners, National Skill Testing Board, recognition of prior learning, accreditation.*

Background

Nepal is a developing country where the informal economy is dominant. According to recent statistics, more than two-thirds of employment (69.7 percent) is in the informal sector, excluding the agricultural sector. If the agricultural sector is added, the figure for employment in the informal

sector becomes 96.2 percent (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2017). Informal workers, who generally have very little formal education, acquire skills informally while working. Nepal has the practice of transforming skills from the senior member of the family to the new member in many

traditional occupations which share a large part of the total employment. Therefore, informal learning is the result of the day to day family-related work, work of interest, social and leisure activities. It happens, and is influenced by chance and need as well. Generally, the informal skills learners are those who have never visited the school or dropped their school education and started career without formal or non-formal skills training (Baral, 2021).

Most of the traditional occupations fulfill the skill of human resource with the skills transfer system from senior craftsperson to beginner skills learner. This is the established practice of skills learning in Nepal (Baral, 2020). Their skills are, however, not always formalized and brought to the formal stream through the certification and recognition of the skill. The recognition and certification of the skills acquired through informal means will boost the employment opportunity, increase rewarding employment, social recognition, and bridge the gap between supply and demand of the skilled human resource. Furthermore, the recognition and the certification will pave the path for the career of learner and credit banking of the skills.

Nepal has an authority to award the competencies certificate through the skill test to recognize the person's competencies. This recognition will integrate the gainful income and promote employability around the globe, which will contribute not only to their quality living but also to the nation's economy. Once

the skills are acquired in the informal sector and learned through the experiences, and the Recognition of the Prior Learning (RPL) are certified, they are recognized as the skilled and competent to move upward through level 1 to level 8 in envisioned by NVQS. Similarly, the certification helps in acquiring the certificate of recognition for the national and international market, which results in lucrative income and the base for formal qualification stream. The competencies acquired through the experiences and work builds the frame of perspective to visualize the world in the different way. This perspective will transform the informal learners to sustainable employment, knowledge and skill to move in the formal stream (Mezirow, 1997).

As I am in the TVET sector for more than two and half decade, I am aware of the value of the skills acquired by informal learning and the tremendous contribution of informal learners in the employment sector. The employee is compelled to remain in the labour market as unemployed or underemployed and work with low salary due to the lack of the certification of the skills although National Skill Testing Board test their skills and provide certification which is both nationally and internationally recognized. I am groomed in this sector and knew that if the informal learners could be brought into the mainstream of the certification with recognition of their skills, the income of the informal learners and the vertical career path through informal learning could reach the highest degree of the skill. It would further

integrate with the formal degree. Having said, the pertinent queries that arise in my mind: what are the challenges informal learners encountering to integrate into the skill test and recognize their acquired skills through informal learning to the skill test system?

Some of the studies conducted could be exemplary to recognize the skills acquired by informal learners. In this regard, the study of Bangladesh concluded that TVET reform was unavoidable and can be reformed only through recognising informal skills learning in the informal sector (ILO, 2009). As per the study result, Bangladesh Government applied the recognition of informal learning through the certification where more than 25 thousand people have already been incorporated through the scheme (a2i, n.d.). Similarly, a study conducted by Smith and Clayton (2009) identifies the factors that hinder to uptake the recognition of the prior learning and the informal learning in Australia are: lack of awareness, orientation, difficult process to follow and the nature of the language used in the process. It also shows that learners are not confident with their own experiential learning and chose to undertake the training, rather opted for the skill test for their skill certification. Similarly, the study of Allias (2010) sought to discover- to what extent, employers are using RPL and the qualifications frameworks in their hiring decisions; to what extent, are national qualification authorities monitoring whether the qualifications they develop are being awarded and what difference these

qualifications make to workers in the job market. Moreover, this research focuses on the impact of the RPL, but silent on why the informal learners are not going for the certification.

Nepal has been adopting this concept for four decades with the establishment of the National Skill Testing Board (NSTB) to conduct skill tests for both non-formal and informal learners (ADB, 2015; NSTB, 2018). The Skill Testing Authority (STA) was established in 1983, which got the responsibility of conducting skill tests and certification for skilled and semi-skilled workers. The scope of the NSTB is the identification of occupations, development of National Occupational Skills Standards (NOSS), conduct of skill tests, and distribution of certificates to the successful candidates (NSTB, 2021). To date (Jan, 2019), as many as 3,68,039 persons have passed the test and been certified by the board (NSTB, 2019). This number of skill tested people is low in comparison with the huge volume of youths working in the informal sector (World Bank, 2019). However, the concern is what the issue and challenges are before the informal learners to get integrated into the skill test system.

Likewise in NSTB's report, the total applicants for level 1, level 2 and level 3 of the year 2017 were 29037, 5571 and 540 respectively, while for the year 2018, the applicants were 51424, 9270 and 1330 respectively. Similarly, for the year 2019, the numbers were 44709, 12805 and 1275

for the level 1, 2, and 3 respectively (NSTB, 2021). This comparison shows a huge gap of applicants appeared in the level 1, 2 and level 3. The pertinent questions are why people are not encouraged to certify their skills despite the possibilities of certification for informal learning. This study encourages exploration of challenges the learners encounter to upgrade their skill although the recognition of the skill enhances the employability and ensures gainful income. Ninety percent of the employees of the TVET sector in Nepal are employed through informal learning (ADB, 2015). If these employees are brought to the formal recognition, the path for their progress through permeability will increase the income, thereby contributing to the nation's economy.

Despite having so many benefits of the formal recognition of informal learning, the data shows that people are the least encouraged to appear for the skill test. Therefore, the reasons behind not opting for the formal recognition of the skill and upgrading of the skill might be lack of awareness that recognition is available in the nation and this has a path for the highest degree from informal learning. The other could be- employer's value in the formal recognition of the certificate is low. The third might be the formal certification has not made any changes in the progression of their career.

In this context, the major concern of this study is to explore the challenges of the informal learners to recognize their skills learnt through informal learning despite

having the quality that it leads to the formal qualification. As such, this study explores the challenges of accreditation so as to contribute knowledge to the policymakers and development practitioners who are in the qualification framework and the testing board.

Hardship of Informal Skill Learners

The Education Flash Report 2018/2019 showed the overall retention rate up to grade 10 was 58% while only 22% were retained up to grade 12 (Centre for Education and Human Resource Development, 2018). This shows that a large number of youth in Nepal is pushed out of the education system without properly preparing them for the world of work (Poudel, 2020). This large percentage of the youths enters employment without skills being part of the informal sector of economy. In Nepal, the informal sector, including various traditional occupations, has been in practice for generations which shares a large part of total employment. These Nepali youths, though competent with the skills, acquire informal learning and are least interested in the skill test of their skill via skill-testing authority. The total number of skill test as compared to the ratio of the learners in the informal sector is very low. On top of that, informal learners might have a desire to upgrade their skills and promote their career along with their skills enhancement and also integrate to the formal attainment of the education. Similarly, Government of Nepal (GoN), in collaboration with Swiss Development

Cooperation (SDC), has initiated the National Vocational Qualification System (NVQS) project to bring the informal learners in the formal education attainment. In fact, National Vocational Qualification Framework (NVQF) has been designed, and approved by the cabinet (Swiss contact, 2020) too. With this, Recognition Prior Learning (RPL) is expected to enhance the access of informal skills learners in recognising and certifying their skills. However, to pursue the goal of the NVQF, it is essential to understand the challenges that hindered the skill test of informal skills learners and explore the way to attract them to the RPL.

The pertinent question is why people are not coming for the skill test and why informal learners are least participated in the skill test despite having NSTB established for four decades and the provision of NVQF to recognize the prior learning of the skill.

The skills acquisition of the informal learners needs to be certified for the recognition of the national and international market. The recognition and certification from the testing authority paves the way for decent employment and gainful income, which will increase earning, contribute to the quality life and finally boost the national economy. The certification of the skill test brings the informal learners to the National Qualification Framework (NQF) for the attainment of formal education. If this problem is not addressed, the Nepali youths entering labor market are compelled to remain underemployed and involve in low-paying jobs. It is indeed resulted with the

lack of recognition to and certification of the skills.

In such a context, few pertinent questions that could be raised are: Why is Nepal's testing authority not successful in bringing informal learners to the skill test certification? Why are the informal learners not interested to certify their skills? Have our policies recognized such need? If yes, why did such a policy not bring the result? The research carried out by Smith and Clayton (2009) in Australia highlighted the language and the process used for the RPL is not user-friendly and learners are unaware of the RPL and the benefits of the RPL. I have not found any research carried out of this nature to explore the possibility of validating informal learning in Nepal so far. Rigorous research of this type is essential in this field.

With this in the background, this study explores the challenges of certification so as to contribute knowledge to the policymakers and development practitioners who are in the qualification framework and the testing board.

Methodology

As per the purpose of the study, I have applied the qualitative research design to explore the challenges encountered while conducting skill testing of the informal skill learners. I assume that the main source of the knowledge is the skilled human resources, which have appeared in the skill test level 1, 2, 3 and participants who have not appeared in the skill test but competent workers. Similarly,

the TVET officials who are working in the NSTB are other key sources of information for this study. Therefore, I collected the information from these two categories of the people, 1) informal skilled learners appeared in skill test of level 1, 2, 3 and people who have not appeared, and 2) TVET officials working in the NSTB.

Under the category of informal skill learners, individual cases of participants whom I interviewed were developed. I interviewed 6 participants of different occupations and different level of skill tests they appeared. To maintain the anonymity of the research participants, I used pseudonyms of the participants and organization.

One of them is Shyam Bahdur Pariyar of 33 years and residing in Rajena, Banke. He is a tailor and dressmaker busy running his enterprises. When I talked to him he was very busy as the background sound of his clients could be heard and he had completed the skill test level-2.

Toran Nagarkoti of 50 years is another from Rasuwa who was hesitant to talk to me as he was least interested to accept the interview. Once assuring the ethical consideration and that the conversation would be kept confidential and used for only research purpose, he began conversation. His occupation is electrician. He even hesitated to say he had passed level 2 of building electrician.

Bharat, who, is 35-year-old from Dailekh is the conflict victim. He is the community livestock assistant who had passed the skill

test level 1. He learned the skill working as an assistant to the senior VET doctors in the village. He is a freelancer and wanted to call him a self-employer and serving his community as the community livestock assistant. Being happy, he told me that he was known as the "*Pasu Doctorsaab*" which means veterinary doctor.

Aaita, who is 35-year-old, was working in a government office but denied talking in the beginning as he was busy providing the service to the public. He passed the skill test level 3 in structural fabricator. He earned the skill through non-formal training and was deputed as a foreman in Sindhupalchowk as a government employee.

Krishna from Gorkha is a worker in one of the reputed construction industries of Kathmandu as mason. He was working in his construction site and instructing the juniors to build the wall as per the drawing and to make sure that it is in ninety degrees. Krishna passed the level 1 skill test as a mason.

Ram, working in the grill workshop, is 24-year-old. He is performing the arc welding to fabricate the channel gate. When I requested him to speak, he told me to wait as he had to finish the gate as per the deadline. After an hour, he spoke with me and told that he learned all the skills by working in different workshops for more than five years. But, he had not appeared in any skill test.

Among the TVET officials, Shiva was selected from the purposive sampling as participant. He has been in this field for

more than 20 years and has long experience in the assessment, evaluation and the result publication of the NSTB.

While selecting the research participants, I prepared the open-ended guideline for the interview (Burgi & Kemper, 2018). The interview was conducted as a conversation type interview and each participant's interview was for about an hour. The participants were contacted through telephone call for the prior appointment of the interview and interviewed through telephone. The observation was made in their workplace. The interview with the informal skill learners and NSTB official were recorded and the recorded interviews were transcribed and coded. The coding helped to draw two themes, which are elaborated in the following section.

Explorations

Based on the interviews with the participants and my reflective experience, two emergent themes have been identified: 1) lack of information and awareness of the skill test system, and 2) certificates are less valued. These are discussed along the following subsections.

Lack of Information and Awareness

This section discusses the information dissemination and awareness about the NSTB. The concept of skill test was traced in 1973 AD when King Birendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev visited the Sunkoshi hydro project. During his visit, the skilled worker involved in the hydropower requested the King for

the certification of their works and skills, arguing that they were competent and skillful to accomplish the technical work. It clearly indicated that the workers were in need of recognition of their skills for further career.

This is the first incident government realized the need for skill test system. But, the autonomous body named Skill Testing Authority (STA) was formally established in 1983 to provide certificates with recognition to the job seekers, skilled and semi-skilled individuals upon the attainment of specific skills. Later in 1989, it was placed under the umbrella of CTEVT as Skill Testing Division. Since then, it has been functioning as the secretariat of the National Skill Testing Board (NSTB) (NSTB, 2021). Though the history of skill-testing authority is of more than 45 years, Ram who is working in the metal industry as a metal craft artisan, dropped the school due to poverty and growing responsibility on him to support his family financially. He started his career as a helper in the Patan industrial area in the metal industry for two years. Once he acquired the skills working as a helper, he moved to the bigger metal industry as a metal craft artisan and has been in that industry for more than eight years. As per the owner of the company, Ram is the most competent worker in his industry. The company owner regretted whether Ram had certified his competency through a formal organization. He even showed unawareness if there were any provisions of such recognition in our country. More than 15 technicians were working in that company along with him,

he said, adding that no one in this industry knew about the provision of recognizing the informally learned skill. Being in the capital city, Ram is completely unknown about the skill test and recognition of the skill which they acquired while working. He highlighted that he never felt the importance of recognition while working. Laughing, he said his salary would not be increased even after he gets the certificates. Reasoning it, he did not feel its need.

The stories of Krishna, Toran and Bharat are similar to that of Ram. Krishna working in a reputed construction industry left school at Grade 6 due to poverty, which left him huge responsibility of looking after his younger sister. He came to the city from the remote village for searching the work and got an opportunity to work with a "*thekedar*", local contractor. As he did not have any skills, he worked as a labor helping the mason. He learnt to work as a mason, working with the local contractor and shifted to another reputed construction industry. He decided to shift to another work station after a local contractor did not increase his salary despite his enhanced skill as a mason. In the current construction company, he has been offered a higher salary than in the previous one. While quoting to the skill test level 1, where he is certified with the mason level 1 certification, he said that his company took the contract of construction of a building. In course of work, the office deputed him as a mason in one of the offices of CTEVT. The official saw his work and asked him where he got the training. He shared that he learnt all

skills through the work. The official further told him that there was the provision of the certification and recognition of the skills he had learnt during the work. But Krishna responded to him that he was least interested in the test because he did not think it would be of any use. The CTEVT official informed him about many benefits and even brought him the application form. "In this way, I applied and appeared the exam and passed it. It has been eight years since I got the level 1 certificate but I haven't used this certificate once and I have not benefited from this certificate in this career," he said, sharing the plight, "*Sir, certificate le talab nabadhne rahe chha*" means this certificate is not contributing to increase of his salary in the organization. While asking him why he did not certify for level 2 and level 3, the answer to this was simple- he did not know where these facilities were and he did not see any benefit of that certificate either.

Similarly, Bharat's story also did not differ much from Krishna's. Bharat is working in the remote area of Dailekh district as a community livestock assistant. He got an opportunity to participate in the non-formal short course in the quota of conflict victim. As this was sponsored by donor agencies for conflict victim, they managed the test in the training centre itself after the completion of training, where he got the skill test level 1 certificate. When asked him why he did not opt for the level 2 test, he replied he did not know when the test was going to start and where it would take place. If the test was conducted he could not go to the centre of the district to appear in the test because it

would be costly as he has to manage the food and accommodation while travelling to the central district.

Similar story is shared by Toran. He is the level 2 certified electrician working in Trisuli. He is in this profession for more than 30 years. He has many building contracts with him and employed 12 junior electricians under him. He did not know about the skill test. One of the employees informed him about the provision of the skill test and appeared in the skill test and passed level 2 exam. As the researcher asked him about the provision of an upward ladder, he was unknown that there was level 3, where the test would take place and when. When asked about the skill test, he was almost unknown about it.

The above participants' views reflect despite 45 years of the establishment of NSTB, there is sheer lack of information and orientation to the target group. The difficulties of the process show that NSTB is not able to disseminate and orient the informal skill learners. The study of Smith and Clayton (2009) identifies the hindrances to uptake the recognition of the prior learning and the informal learning in Australia- lack of awareness, orientation, and the difficulties in the process to follow and the nature of the language used in the process in line with the current study. Similarly, many studies emphasize the individual's motivation is important to acquire the certification and the information. Acquiring the certification must be easily accessed and transparent along with individual responsibility that is incorporated

into the recognition process to encourage the informal learners in the recognition frame (Duvekot et al., 2003; Gomes et al., 2007; Singh, 2009).

However, while interviewing the NSTB official, he denied the lack of dissemination of the information to the stakeholder. NSTB is the government body and whoever requires can come for the test, he added. After providing with him the evidence that a large number of informal skill learners did not know about the testing authority of the country- when, where and how the skill test was conducted, he then realized with hesitation that authority could expand the orientation, information dissemination through the province and local governments.

The above version shows the informal skill learners and the NSTB official have a common understanding of the lack of adequate dissemination of the information and lack of orientation about the testing authority. This is not only the case in Nepal but also other countries of South Asia. They have suffered the issue of the dissemination of the information and orientation to the stakeholders (ADB, 2019). In this regard, a study conducted by Smith (2004) highlighted the recognition of the informal skill learner's need that they be provided information in a clear, concise and jargon-free manner.

Certificate Less Valued

Krishna highlighted his company never valued the importance of the Skill Test certificate and there was no difference in his

earning with the certificate he got from the testing authority. The story of Toran is not different from that of Krishna, because he underscored that he never used that certificate after receiving it from the testing authority. In the case of Bharat, he is in confusion whether his certificate will have value in future as he has not yet used it for any benefits. But, he hopes if he applies it for foreign employment and maybe in the government sector, this will have the meaning. Till now, it had no use.

In this case, the NSTB official agrees that the private employers have not yet valued the testing authority certificate and the employers complain how the testing authority could assure that once they are certified, they could perform their work well. The private sector is not aware of the importance of skill test certificate. On many occasions, the government organizations do not accept the certificate of the NSTB during the vacancy announcement in technical positions though the testing certificate is implemented through the act.

The certificate is less valued and has little recognition in the market. As the demand side is indifferent, the government has to work actively to establish the value of the certificate.

Shyam Bahadur Pariyar of 33 year, residing in Kohalpur, has, however, different experience. He completed bachelor in education, but has been working as a tailor and dressmaker for 18 years. He learned these skills from his father from childhood. He is currently running his boutique and

works in the training centre of Kohalpur as an instructor after earning the level 2 certificate. When he was asked how he came to know about the provisions of the skill test, he replied one of the officers of the small and cottage industry of the Surkhet informed him about the skill test. He did accordingly and got the level 2 certificate. He expressed he had a lot of benefits from the certificate. He was able to be the instructor. When he was addressed as 'Sir' by his students in the community, he felt proud and recognized by the society. But, without hesitation, he explained that recognition of the skills which he has acquired through prior learning has no meaning in his boutique. The certificate has no difference in earning at the boutique.

He further shared when a friend from similar occupation is met, the discussion on certified and non-certified surfaces. Non certified friends talk about the difference: "We are also running the boutique and you are also running the boutique. Do you find any difference between you having the certificate and us not having the certificate?" Shyam further highlights while running a business or being self-employed there is no value in the skill test certificate. He added this because people and the market had not understood the value of the certificate. He is, however, optimistic that the government could provide loan from the bank upon the submission of the certificate to start business, which, he believes, will lead to the recognition of skill learned informally.

The story Aaita has is: he joined the

Technical School Leaving Certificate (TSLC) in mechanical engineering 31 years back. He had adequate working experiences in the hydropower companies in the country and abroad as well. He finally joined the government organization. He said the certificate had great value for the promotion of his career, so he appeared the level 3 test and passed it. This will pave the way for his promotion, according to him.

The above discussion shows recognition of the informal skills through the national testing authority has less value in the private industries. The employers of the business and industries less appreciate the certification of the skill test, and never prioritise the certificate while recruiting the technicians. But, it has a great value working in the government organization. The private organizations even discourage the skill test certification with the fear of demand of high salary by the workers. They are happy to pay little salary for not having the certificate of recognition. Most of the government organizations give value to the certification of the skill test. Similarly, studies conducted by few researchers expressed the value of the certificate provided by the NSTB to the informal skill learners are less valued in the informal market by the employers (Baral, 2020; Regmi, 2009).

Conclusion

In Nepal, 80 percent of the workers work in the informal sector and the informal sector occupies a large volume and is dominant (Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2015).

Nepalis learn their livelihood skills and skills for the vocation through work. Current statistics shows 69.7 percent of workers is in the informal sector (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2017). This trend increases as thousands of Nepalis are returning from foreign employment due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The national economy is largely propped up by the skilled workers working in the informal sector. If these skilled workers were brought in the formal sector, they would secure the decent employment, and make handsome income, which ultimately addresses the underpayment and underemployment problems.

To bring the informal skill learners to the formal sector, the skills learned through the work need to be recognized and they should be awarded the skill test certificate. But, it is mentioned that it is not an easy task because the huge number of people working in the informal sector have little information about the provision of testing informal skill learners. The orientation and awareness of the importance of the skill test among the informal learners are slow off the mark because the stakeholders have limited knowledge and practices of the skill test. The importance of integrating formal education through informal learning is almost nonexistent.

The value of the skill test certificate is less appreciated by the private sector employers and never demanded such certificates while applying for the job there. Similarly, the people, who have received the skill test

certificates, have not used the certificate for any purpose. Despite 45 years since the establishment of NSTB, its access is not ensured to all parts of the nation. Therefore, to integrate the informal learners into the formal education system for the decent employment, gainful income and to eliminate the underemployment, massive awareness about the testing authority is imperative. The orientation on the benefits of the testing centre and dissemination of the information and process of the test need to be rigorously expanded to larger public.

The private sector should be brought under the scrutiny of the testing authority while recruiting human resources so that they would be accountable and begin recognizing the value of the skill test and ensure proper payment to workers.

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