

Examination Management in Higher Education in Nepal: A Review of Practices and Challenges

Dipesh Kumar Karn ¹, Anjay Kumar Mishra ² & P. S. Aithal ³

¹ Assistant Professor, Madhesh University, Birgunj, Parsa, Nepal,
M.Phil Scholar, Purbanchal University, Biratnagar, Morang, Nepal
ORCID: 0009-0007-0909-8613; Email: dipeshkarn86@gmail.com

² Dean, Madhesh University, Birgunj, Parsa, Nepal,
ORCID: 0000-0003-2803-4918; Email: anjaymishra2000@gmail.com

³ Professor, Poornaprajna Institute of Management, Udupi, India,
ORCID: 0000-0002-4691-8736; Email: psaithal@gmail.com

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Examination Management in Higher Education in Nepal: A Review of Practices and Challenges

Dipesh Kumar Karn¹, Anjay Kumar Mishra² & P. S. Aithal³

¹ Assistant Professor, Madhesh University, Birgunj, Parsa, Nepal,
M.Phil Scholar, Purbanchal University, Biratnagar, Morang, Nepal
ORCID: 0009-0007-0909-8613; Email: dipeshkarn86@gmail.com

² Dean, Madhesh University, Birgunj, Parsa, Nepal,
ORCID: 0000-0003-2803-4918; Email: anjaymishra2000@gmail.com

³ Professor, Poornaprajna Institute of Management, Udupi, India,
ORCID: 0000-0002-4691-8736; Email: psaithal@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Background: Examination management remains central to academic quality and accountability in higher education, yet Nepal's system continues to struggle with delays, malpractice, political interference, and memory-based assessment despite the shift to semester and GPA-based grading.

Objective: This study critically reviews examination management practices in Nepalese higher education, identifies core challenges, and proposes reform strategies for a more transparent, efficient, and student-centered system.

Methodology: A qualitative, descriptive review design was used, drawing on secondary sources-peer-reviewed articles, policy reports, and institutional documents (2017–2026)-selected purposively and analyzed thematically.

Findings/Analysis: Findings reveal a persistently examination-centered system shaped by delays, political interference, weak infrastructure, and malpractice, causing student stress while worsening inequality in provinces like Madhesh. Digital transformation and competency-based reform offer promising pathways toward a more effective, learning-centered examination system.

Conclusion: Nepal's examination system requires a fundamental shift from credential-focused, memory-based testing toward learning-centered, competency-driven assessment supported by digital infrastructure and institutional autonomy.

Implication: Findings offer actionable guidance for policymakers and university administrators seeking to modernize examination governance and reduce inequality.

Novelty: This study uniquely integrates administrative, psychological, socio-economic, and technological dimensions into a single reform-oriented framework for Nepalese examination management.

Type of Paper: Qualitative Descriptive Thematic Research.

Keywords: Examination Management, Higher Education Nepal, Competency-Based Assessment, Academic Integrity, Digital Transformation

1. INTRODUCTION :

Examination management is a fundamental component of higher education, serving as the primary mechanism for assessing students' academic achievement, knowledge acquisition, and learning outcomes. An effective examination system not only evaluates student performance but also contributes to maintaining academic quality, credibility, transparency, and institutional accountability. In higher education institutions, examination practices are closely linked with teaching, learning, research, and overall academic governance.

In Nepal, the higher education examination system has undergone significant transformation over the past decade. Traditional annual examinations and percentage-based evaluation systems have gradually been replaced by semester-based programs, Grade Point Average (GPA), and letter grading systems. Despite these reforms, examination management continues to face numerous administrative,

technological, and quality-related challenges. Delays in examinations and result publication, inadequate digital infrastructure, examination malpractice, political interference, weak coordination among stakeholders, and excessive reliance on memory-based written examinations remain persistent concerns.

Furthermore, growing demands for quality assurance, employability skills, research competence, and global competitiveness require examination systems to move beyond conventional assessment approaches. In this context, a comprehensive review of existing examination management practices and challenges is necessary. Therefore, this article examines the current examination management system in Nepalese higher education, identifies major challenges, and proposes strategic reforms to enhance efficiency, transparency, quality, and student-centered learning outcomes.

Recent studies have examined various dimensions of examination management in higher education, including memory-based assessment practices [1] [2], psychological stress associated with high-stakes examinations [3] [4] [5], examination malpractice [6], technology-enabled assessment approaches [7] [8] [9], and grading systems [10] [11]. However, limited research has provided a comprehensive synthesis of examination management practices, challenges, and reform strategies within the Nepalese higher education context. This review seeks to address this gap by critically examining existing practices and proposing future directions for effective examination management. Karn (2024) [12] found that job insecurity, inflation, and low pay caused significant stress among private sector workers in Birgunj, suggesting emotional intelligence and Buddhist mindfulness could improve emotion regulation under pressure. This implies similar interventions could help Nepalese students manage exam-related anxiety, adding a psychological dimension to structural reforms. The socio-economic realities highlighted by Karn et al. (2025) [13] provide additional insight into examination management in Nepal. High unemployment, inflation, social pressure, and the pursuit of academic credentials often intensify examination-related stress and grade-oriented behaviour, reinforcing the need for more student-centered, competency-based, and supportive assessment systems. Madhesh Province's socio-economic context-marked by poverty, unemployment, infrastructural gaps, and limited technology access-shapes examination outcomes and reinforces reliance on traditional assessment methods, underscoring the need for more inclusive, technology-supported examination practices [14]. [15], using interpretive phenomenological interviews with former OCE deputy controllers, found that transparency, institutional capacity, timely results, and certificate issuance remain key challenges for Tribhuvan University's examination office, recommending digitalization, regional delegation, and an internal research unit to enhance efficiency, accountability, and student-friendly service delivery [16], through phenomenological interviews with eight Master's students in English and Biology Education at Tribhuvan University, found that despite progress in the semester-based assessment system, internal assessment still requires reform in attendance enforcement, classroom participation, research involvement, and writing skills. The study also called for stronger alignment between curriculum and real-world skill development, echoing broader institutional calls for examination reforms grounded in student experience. Patil et al. (2021) [17] proposed a blockchain and IoT-based architecture using distributed ledgers, cryptography, and biometric tracking to enhance examination security and trust, offering a relevant technological direction for addressing integrity concerns in Nepal's examination system, despite implementation challenges. Service quality and stakeholder satisfaction are critical across sectors; similarly, examination management in Nepalese higher education requires systematic reforms to meet institutional expectations [18]. Pokhara University (PU) has completed 25 years of academic excellence in Nepal, marked by innovative curricula, centralized examination, and strong industry linkages [19]. This article reviews PU's achievements and proposes strategies to strengthen its research and teaching culture.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW :

2.1 Traditional and Memory-Based Examination Practices Examination procedures in Nepal's higher education system remain largely conventional and memory-based. Acharya (2022) [1] found weak formative evaluation and recommended a shift toward competency-based assessment, while Adhikary and Acharya (2026) [2], in a Tribhuvan University case study, identified frequent postponements and political interference alongside memorization-based testing, concluding that stakeholders favor competency-based, decentralized, and digital reforms.

2.2 Psychological Impact of High-Stakes Examinations High-stakes examinations carry significant psychological costs for students. Dawadi (2021) [3] found that parental and societal pressure intensifies exam stress and reinforces rote learning, recommending assessment reform and counseling support. Similarly, Mishra et al. (2020) [4] reported high rates of stress, anxiety, and depression among medical entrance exam candidates, while Tharu (2023) [5] linked adolescent exam anxiety to gender and parental expectations, both calling for reduced parental pressure and stronger psychological support systems.

2.3 Academic Integrity and Examination Malpractice Examination malpractice remains a persistent challenge. Ghimire et al. (2024) [6] found that cheating is widespread across Nepali educational institutions, driven by poorly designed exam questions and excessive grade focus, and called for urgent institutional action to strengthen academic integrity.

2.4 Alternative and Technology-Enabled Assessment Formats Emerging assessment formats offer both opportunities and risks. Bengtsson (2019) [8] found that take-home exams encourage higher-order thinking and reduce anxiety but raise integrity concerns, performing best in hybrid formats with safeguards. Acharya et al. (2022) [7] similarly found that online examinations during COVID-19 supported continuity but were limited by infrastructure and connectivity issues, concluding that blended formats require stronger institutional policy and training. Complementing this, French et al. (2024) [9] argued that low-stakes, continuous assessments generally outperform high-stakes exams in supporting motivation, validity, and equity.

2.5 Grading and Evaluation Methods Institutional resistance shapes the adoption of innovative grading models. Mesny et al. (2026) [10] found that conventional grading dominates management education, with techniques like peer assessment underused and ungrading rarely adopted, calling for greater experimentation and structural support. Wang (2017) [11], however, affirmed that traditional score-based GPA grading remains scientifically sound for admissions and academic recognition.

2.6 Contextual and Infrastructural Challenges in Madhesh Province Provincial-level evidence highlights structural barriers. Yadav et al. (2024) [20] found that poverty, weak infrastructure, language barriers, and overreliance on paper-based testing constrain Madhesh Province's examination system, contributing to unequal educational outcomes and limited critical-thinking development. Similar theory-practice gaps have been documented in Madhesh Province, where practitioners rated experiential learning, internships, and workplace readiness poorly despite moderate satisfaction with classroom methods, underscoring the need for industry-linked, practice-oriented educational reform [21].

3. RESEARCH GAP :

Although prior studies have examined isolated aspects of examination management in Nepal-memory-based assessment [1] [2], psychological stress [3] [4] [5], malpractice [6], technology-enabled formats [8] [7] [9], and grading practices [10] [11] -these works remain fragmented, addressing single dimensions in isolation rather than the system as a whole. Limited attention has been given to integrating administrative, psychological, socio-economic, and technological dimensions within one coherent framework, particularly in the context of Nepal's higher education. Furthermore, existing literature offers little practitioner-grounded synthesis linking routine examination administration to broader, actionable reform strategies, and provincial-level disparities-especially in Madhesh Province-remain underexplored despite their significant bearing on educational equity. This study addresses these gaps by providing an integrated, thematic synthesis of examination management challenges and reform directions within the Nepalese context.

4. OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER :

- (1) To examine current examination management practices in Nepal's higher education system.
- (2) To identify key administrative, structural, and psychological challenges affecting examination processes.
- (3) To analyze the role of digital transformation in addressing examination management issues.
- (4) To propose reform strategies for a more transparent, efficient, and competency-based system.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN :

This study employs a qualitative, descriptive review design to examine examination management practices and challenges within Nepal's higher education system. Drawing entirely on secondary

sources-peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, institutional documents, and relevant scholarly publications from the past decade (2017–2026)-the research relies on purposive selection to identify literature addressing examination systems, assessment practices, academic integrity, student psychology, grading methods, and digital transformation, with particular emphasis on Nepal and comparable developing-country contexts. In order to identify recurrent patterns, gaps, and emerging trends, the chosen sources were methodically scrutinized and subjected to thematic analysis. The results were then categorized into key areas, including administrative practices, structural issues, psychological impact, malpractice, and reform directions. This design is ideal for producing policy- and practice-oriented insights because it provides a thorough conceptual grasp of examination management without requiring primary data collecting.

6. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK :

Exam management is conceptualized in this study as a process influenced by three interrelated dimensions: administrative procedures, contextual challenges, and reform routes. The system's operational core is made up of administrative procedures such question formulation, moderation, conduct, evaluation, and result processing. However, these procedures are influenced by an examination-oriented learning culture that places more emphasis on memorization than competency. Administrative delays, political meddling, inadequate human resource capacity, and concerns about academic integrity are some of the structural obstacles that limit these practices. These obstacles collectively result in detrimental psychological and educational outcomes, such as student stress, unequal access, and restricted critical-thinking development. These obstacles can be lessened and the system shifted from examination-centered to learning-centered education through the use of digital transformation and competency-based reform as mediating mechanisms. This paradigm provides the structural foundation for the thematic synthesis offered in this analysis by positioning examination management as a system integrated within institutional, psychological, and policy contexts rather than as an isolated administrative activity.

7. SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS :

7.1 The Examination System in Nepalese Higher Education:

In Nepal's higher education system, exams play a crucial role as the main instrument used to gauge students' learning. Students' final performance on these tests is influenced by teaching, classroom involvement, and research engagement. Exams have traditionally been seen in Nepal as the means of obtaining official credentials, which has caused many students to place more importance on passing and achieving high scores than developing practical abilities. In the past ten years, Nepalese institutions and boards have gradually transitioned from annual, percentage-based exams to GPA and letter-grading systems. Additionally, academic calendars have shifted from annual to semester-based in an effort to promote more ongoing assessment.

7.2 Internal and External Assessment Mechanisms;

Higher education institutions in Nepal rely on both internal and external assessment. While external evaluation is based on written exams at the conclusion of the term, internal assessment usually includes attendance, assignments, presentations, practical work, and class participation. Attendance marks are frequently given rather informally through internal channels since, despite statutory requirements, enforcement of minimum attendance criteria is uneven. Although elements like field-based learning, entrepreneurial initiatives, and managerial simulations are acknowledged as part of internal evaluation on paper, their actual application varies throughout schools.

7.3 Examination-Oriented Learning Culture:

One of the main problems with the Nepalese system is that learning is now focused more on passing tests than on developing competency. Selective preparation rather than true mastery is encouraged by the prevalence of memorization, guess papers, and recycled question banks, as well as the fact that exam questions in many topics follow identifiable patterns, frequently with only minor modifications. The majority of research exposure is limited to thesis work near the end of a program rather than being dispersed throughout the academic journey, undermining the university's larger goal of encouraging research and critical thinking.

7.4 How Examinations Are Administered:

Subject-matter specialists create the question papers, which are then moderated, printed in confidence, distributed, and administered at exam centers under the supervision of designated superintendents. To enable rechecking or re-totalling requests, answer scripts are classified, assessed by designated examiners, and kept for a predetermined amount of time. The study found that universities use 4-point scales, 10-point scales, or their own designed grading mechanisms. In these systems, every point is referred to as a grade point and is defined by a certain interval of percentage marks. These particular grade points correspond to specific letter grades such as A+, A, A-, B+, B, and B-. The findings further revealed that students who do not obtain the minimum Grade Point Average (GPA) are either considered failed or assigned a Not Graded (NG) status. Some practices also showed that passing in every subject alone is not sufficient for students to be regarded as having successfully completed the respective semester; rather, they are additionally required to obtain a minimum Semester Grade Point Average (SGPA). The semester and cumulative results are then calculated by combining external scores with internal marks from affiliated campuses. SGPA and CGPA are calculated by the institutions that use the grading system, but many students still mentally translate these into percentage measures, indicating a lack of knowledge with the grading rationale itself. Digital examination platforms have transformed higher education delivery globally, offering secure, scalable, and integrity-driven assessment solutions [22]. Adopting such evidence-based online examination frameworks within Nepalese higher education institutions could significantly address prevailing examination management challenges, improving both administrative efficiency and academic credibility.

7.5 Core Challenges:

Perhaps the most enduring issue is delay, which affects both the timely administration of exams and the subsequent release of the results. In terms of scheduling, this results from inadequate session planning, numerous holidays, a lack of permanent staff, poor adherence to academic calendars, and delayed course completion. Examiners submitting reviewed scripts late, insufficient assessment honoraria, administrative bottlenecks, limited technological capability, and a lack of qualified staff all contribute to result delays. Students' advancement, eligibility for scholarships, admissions deadlines, and employment opportunities are all impacted by the downstream impacts. Academic dishonesty is a connected issue, with smartphones, smartwatches, and other digital gadgets compounding traditional techniques of cheating. This risk is increased and, in certain situations, students' psychological stress is exacerbated by the pressure to get excellent grades for scholarships, admission, or employment. Similar administrative inefficiencies have been noted in other Nepalese organizational contexts, where classical management principles struggle against socio-political and infrastructural constraints, suggesting that examination governance may benefit from structured, efficiency-oriented reforms grounded in scientific management theory [23].

Another layer of complexity is created by political meddling: examination offices themselves often lack the independence to take decisive action, and decisions about staffing, scheduling, and governance are occasionally influenced by non-academic factors that undermine efficiency and accountability. The prevalence of three-hour written tests that assess memory rather than critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving, or practical ability is another quality issue. This is especially evident in professional domains like business, management, and law, where graduates are ill-prepared for competitive job markets due to the persistence of theoretical testing despite the practical demands of these sectors. Lastly, a lack of qualified examination staff, inadequate capacity-building, and poor coordination among campuses, examination offices, and departments continue to hinder administrative efficacy.

7.6 Digital Transformation as an Opportunity:

Exam management modernization provides a direct route to increased effectiveness and openness. Integrated examination management information systems, online registration and admit cards, digital transcripts, barcode-based script tracking, biometric attendance, AI-assisted scheduling, automated result verification, technology-driven cheating detection, and electronic certification are examples of possibilities that could significantly cut down on delays and enhance service delivery.

7.7 Directions for Reform:

Expanding continuous and competency-based assessment, decreasing reliance on traditional written exams, strengthening practical and project-based evaluation, giving examination offices more administrative autonomy, implementing digital examination systems, introducing double-blind or multiple-checking evaluation, enhancing examiner compensation and accountability, tightening integrity safeguards, increasing staff training, integrating AI and analytics into administration, transitioning to paperless and e-certified processes, and strengthening quality assurance at every stage are all necessary to strengthening the system. Buddhist principles such as mindfulness and ethical conduct have similarly shaped community-based education and value-driven learning environments in Nepal, suggesting that culturally rooted philosophical frameworks could inform more holistic, student-centered examination and assessment practices [24].

7.8 Toward Learning-Centered Education:

In order to better align results with both national priorities and international standards, Nepalese higher education must ultimately move away from an examination-centered model and toward one that is focused on learning itself, where critical thinking, research capacity, ethical behavior, innovation, and employability are valued alongside academic credentials.

8. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS :

This research shows that old, memory-based methods that put credential acquisition ahead of real competency development continue to influence examination management in Nepal's higher education system. The system's legitimacy and effectiveness are still being undermined by administrative inefficiencies, such as persistent delays in examinations and result release, political meddling, and inadequate human resource capability. High-stakes tests exacerbate students' stress, anxiety, and despair, and ongoing academic dishonesty further undermines institutional integrity. These structural flaws are exacerbated by substantial psychological costs. Provincial differences, especially in Madhesh Province, demonstrate how socioeconomic limitations like poverty, inadequate infrastructure, and restricted access to technology exacerbate educational inequality and inhibit the growth of critical thinking.

At the same time, this review identifies clear opportunities for reform. Digital transformation-through examination management information systems, biometric verification, blockchain-based security, and AI-assisted scheduling-offers a credible path toward greater transparency, efficiency, and trust. Institutional case evidence, such as reforms proposed for Tribhuvan University's Office of the Controller of Examinations, further suggests that decentralization, capacity-building, and stronger accountability mechanisms can meaningfully improve service delivery. Psychological resources such as hope, self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism have been shown to enhance motivation and adaptability among employees in resource-constrained Nepalese environments, suggesting that similar psychological-capital-based interventions could help students and examination staff cope with stress and performance pressure [25].

Based on these findings, several recommendations are proposed. First, examination authorities should expand competency-based and continuous assessment models to reduce overreliance on rote memorization. Second, examination offices require greater administrative autonomy and protection from political interference to function efficiently. Third, sustained investment in digital infrastructure and staff training is essential, particularly in underserved provinces like Madhesh. Fourth, institutions should strengthen academic integrity policies through improved question design and stricter malpractice safeguards. Finally, psychological support services, potentially informed by emotional intelligence and mindfulness-based approaches, should be integrated into examination management to help students manage exam-related stress.

When taken as a whole, these actions indicate a long-term transition from an examination-centered system to a learning-centered model that can produce graduates with resilience, practical competence, and critical thinking skills appropriate to both national development needs and international academic standards.

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