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Editorial

A Platform for Advancing Training, Capacity Development, and Public Service Excellence

We are pleased to present the inaugural issue of "The Trainer: A Journal of Capacity Development", a peer-reviewed publication of Nepal Administrative Staff College (NASC). The publication of this first volume marks an important milestone for the NASC and for the wider community of trainers, educators, researchers, practitioners, and policymakers who share a commitment to capacity development and improving public service.

For more than six decades, NASC has played a leading role in developing knowledge, skills, and leadership of human resources in public sector through wide range of training programmes. It has contributed to their professional growth and also supported institutional reforms. These efforts have generated a wealth of practical experience and institutional knowledge. Much of that learning, however, has remained within training programmes, project reports, or institutional memory. Opportunities to document those experiences, examine them critically, and share them with a broader professional community have been limited. "The Trainer" is an initiative to fulfill this need.

Training occupies a central place in institutional development. It strengthens individual capabilities, supports organizational learning, and enables institutions to respond more effectively to changing circumstances. Governments face various challenges in the context of rapid technological advances, rising public expectations, and demands for effective service delivery. Capacity development has become key imperative to cope with such challenges; create public value and ensure citizen satisfaction.

The Journal aims to provide a credible platform where evidence, experience, and thoughtful reflection come together. The Journal encourages scholarship that is informed by practice while recognizing the value of insights generated through professional experience. Effectiveness of training is shaped by careful observation, experimentation, and reflection as formal research does. Both forms of knowledge deserve careful documentation and critical discussion.

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The Journal welcomes original research articles, practice papers, case studies, reflective essays, methodological contributions, and reviews. Rigorous research remains fundamental to advancing the field, but equally valuable are well-documented experiences that offer practical lessons for trainers, institutions, and policymakers. Many innovations in capacity development emerge from practice before they become the subject of formal research. Providing space for both strengthens the profession and enriches scholarly understanding.

The Journal intends to serve a much wider community of scholars and practitioners. Capacity development benefits from dialogue across institutions, disciplines, and national boundaries. We therefore welcome contributions from scholars and practitioners working in government, universities, training institutions, development organizations, and the private sector, among others. Different contexts often present different solutions, and sharing those experiences creates opportunities for mutual learning. We hope the Journal will encourage meaningful exchanges that connect theory with practice and local experience with broader international perspectives.

The Trainer also reflects NASC's long-standing commitment to strengthening the profession of training. Training is often viewed primarily as a learning process, yet it is increasingly recognized as a field that requires sound theory, systematic inquiry, ethical practice, and continuous innovation. The journal offers an opportunity to strengthen that professional identity by encouraging critical analysis, documenting evidence, evaluating new approaches, and promoting informed discussion on issues that shape capacity development.

Every journal earns its reputation over time. Its standing depends on the quality of the work it publishes, the integrity of its editorial process, and the confidence it builds among readers and contributors. We invite trainers, researchers, practitioners, and policymakers in this shared forum for scholarly inquiry, professional dialogue, and the exchange of ideas. The Journal will continue to grow through the collective contributions of its authors, reviewers, readers, and editorial team.

The manuscripts featured in this inaugural issue reflect the diverse and evolving concerns of training and capacity development. The issue brings together research and reflective contributions on the use of artificial intelligence in training needs assessment, training transfer, and the relationship between higher education, training, competence, and employability in Nepal. It also examines employee performance appraisal and training in Nepal’s federal civil service, experiential design thinking in public sector training, and the reflective dimensions of module coordination and effective training management. The issue also presents a provincial perspective on employee capacity development through the experience of a provincial training institution and features an interview with the Officiating Executive Director of NASC on leading capacity development for better governance. Collectively, these contributions bring together empirical evidence, professional experience, institutional reflection, and emerging perspectives.

This inaugural issue has been made possible through the commitment of many individuals. I extend my sincere appreciation to the authors for contributing their work, to the reviewers for their thoughtful and constructive evaluations, and to the members of the Editorial Board and the editorial team for their dedication throughout the process of this publication. I also express my gratitude to the leadership of NASC for their vision and continued support in bringing this initiative to fruition.

The publication of Volume 1, Issue 1 represents the beginning of a long-term endeavor to strengthen scholarly and professional practice in training and capacity development. We trust that the articles published in this inaugural issue will stimulate discussion, encourage further research, and offer practical insights for those engaged in developing capability of human resources and institutions for better governance and effective public services. We believe that "The Trainer" will grow continuously as a respected source of knowledge; contribute to knowledge economy and capacity development in Nepal, South Asia, and the wider international community.

Editor-in-Chief

Research Article

Making Meritocracy Work: Institutional Barriers, Competence-Performance Gaps, and Lessons for Capacity Building Institutions in Nepal

Pramod Niroula

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Abstract

Contemporary civil services, in principle, operate on the premise that meritocratic recruitment yields competent officials capable of delivering quality public services. However, officials who outperform competitors during selection often struggle to translate competence into effective administrative performance. This study investigates how experienced Nepali civil servants perceive institutional barriers mediating the relationship between entry competence and administrative performance. Anchored in an interpretivist-constructivist paradigm, the study draws on nine in-depth first-person accounts of serving and retired civil servants, analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Results indicate that participants consistently describe institutional constraints, misaligned incentives, political-administrative relations, and bureaucratic socialization as systematic mediators of competence enactment. The paper posits that meritocratic recruitment constitutes a necessary but insufficient condition for administrative effectiveness, and that performance emerges as a property of the institutional ecosystems within which competence is exercised. The findings offer lessons for capacity building institutions in Nepal, suggesting they may consider evolving beyond training delivery to embrace institutional engagement as a means to address the competence-performance gap.

Keywords: meritocracy, competence, performance, capacity building, civil service reform, Nepal

Introduction

The idea of modern bureaucratic governance relies on the foundational institutional assumption that merit-based recruitment produces able, rule-abiding, and administratively efficient public employees. Competitive examinations have since the nineteenth-century reforms of civil service in Britain and the United States become the predominant mechanism of bureaucratic selection across most administrative systems. This model is theoretically grounded in the Weberian conception of rational-legal authority, wherein bureaucratic legitimacy derives from technical expertise, formal regulations, and impersonal meritocratic recruitment rather than patronage or hereditary privilege (Weber, 1978). The normative

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appeal of meritocracy finds substantial empirical support. Bureaucracies characterized by merit-based recruitment demonstrate higher administrative capacity, reduced corruption, and improved policy implementation outcomes (Dahlstrom & Lapuente, 2017; Lewis, 2008). Cross-national studies indicate that meritocratic bureaucracies enhance state capacity by improving epistemics in decision-making and facilitating technical implementation of state policy. However, contemporary comparative governance evidence increasingly complicates this linear assumption, particularly in developing bureaucratic systems where formal meritocracy coexists with persistent institutional underperformance.

Nepal provides a compelling case in point. Longitudinal assessment of governance indicators reveals institutional inertia across corruption, bureaucratic effectiveness, and state capacity dimensions, despite formally merit-based civil service recruitment. Over the period 2021-2025, Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) records only minor fluctuations, with Nepal's scores ranging between 33 and 34 points, maintaining position in the lower half of the 180 countries measured, from around 117th in 2021 to approximately 107th-109th in 2025 (Transparency International, 2025). These minor changes reflect statistical variation rather than substantive improvement in public sector integrity, suggesting structural attitudes toward corruption have not substantially changed despite competitive recruitment. Similarly, the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI), particularly the Government Effectiveness Index, a proxy for bureaucratic quality and policy implementation capacity, reveal consistently negative scores for Nepal throughout the study period, ranging from -0.67 in 2021 to -0.64 in 2025, with observations through 2024 based on the most recent methodological release (World Bank, 2025). This chronic underperformance indicates enduring structural challenges in bureaucratic capacity and state effectiveness. Further, the Chandler Good Government Index (CGGI), measuring broader state capacity including leadership, institutional effectiveness, and public service delivery, consistently ranks Nepal in the bottom half globally, with positions fluctuating between approximately 88th and 95th from 2021-2025 without significant improvement (Chandler Institute of Governance, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025).

These indicators collectively present a consistent empirical picture: stagnation in Nepal's administrative system across corruption control, state capability, and bureaucratic effectiveness dimensions, despite formally meritocratic recruitment mechanisms. These aggregate indices provide important national governance context, but they do not by themselves establish that competitively selected officials were competent at entry or subsequently underperformed due to institutional constraints. Rather, they suggest a structural disjuncture between bureaucratic selection procedures and actual administrative performance that warrants investigation.

Civil servants entering through highly competitive examinations demonstrate strong cognitive and analytical competence upon entry, yet often appear to struggle in translating these competencies into sustained administrative effectiveness once embedded within

bureaucracies. This apparent competence-performance disjuncture forms the foundation from which the present study departs. This paper investigates how experienced civil servants perceive institutional barriers that mediate the relationship between entry competence and administrative performance, contributing to the explanation of what may be conceptualized as a competence-performance gap in public bureaucracy. The research is guided by the following question: How do civil servants perceive institutional factors that mediate the relationship between their entry competence and administrative performance?

Extensive literature demonstrates that merit-based selection improves bureaucratic quality, state capacity, and governance performance. Classical and contemporary studies consistently show merit-based civil service systems reduce corruption, enhance administrative capability, and strengthen policy implementation (Evans & Rauch, 1999, 2000; Dahlstrom & Lapuente, 2017; Fukuyama, 2013, 2014). This literature builds on Weberian rational-legal bureaucracy assumptions that competitive recruitment yields superior knowledge, technical skills, and administrative abilities enhancing organizational performance (Weber, 1978). However, despite widespread acceptance of this assumption, mechanisms converting competence into performance remain undertheorized. It is generally assumed that meritocratic recruitment produces competent governance, yet institutional mechanisms facilitating, limiting, or reordering competence once individuals enter bureaucracy have received limited scholarly attention.

Organizational behavior and management scholarship has long established that performance reflects not merely ability but also organizational support, motivation, opportunity structures, incentives, and context (Campbell et al., 1993; Campbell & Wiernik, 2015). Likewise, public administration scholarship highlights public service motivation, leadership, organizational culture, and institutional design in shaping bureaucratic behavior (Perry & Wise, 1990; Rainey, 2009). Yet these insights remain insufficiently integrated with work on meritocratic staffing and bureaucratic performance.

Institutional theory further illuminates this gap. Rules, norms, routines, and culturally embedded expectations shape institutional behavior (March & Olsen, 1989; North, 1990; Scott, 2014). Competence is not an independent source of performance but is expressed through institutional structures shaping which actions are legitimate, rewarded, possible, and politically acceptable. However, research on institutional factors shaping competence has given limited attention to how institutional contexts actively reconfigure competence by shaping perceptions of opportunities, risk, and deployment of capabilities in practice.

The present study contributes to institutionalist explanations of bureaucratic performance by introducing a multidimensional framework for understanding performance as a phenomenon mediated by systems rather than a straightforward function of individual competence. The study presents the following analytical formulation as a sensitizing framework: Performance is a function of Ability, Motivation, Opportunity, Incentives, and Institutional Environment. This formulation is presented as a conceptual heuristic to illustrate the interaction among

multiple determinants of performance, not as an empirically tested or mathematically proven relationship. Competence represents unexpressed potential entering bureaucratic organization, but develops only in response to motivational forces, opportunity structures, incentive systems, and larger institutional contexts. Bureaucratic effectiveness thus emerges not as a summation of individual effectiveness but as an emergent property of organizational and institutional arrangements.

Methodologically, the study employs an interpretivist approach exploring the lived experiences of serving and retired civil servants using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). This approach reveals how bureaucratic actors perceive, interpret, negotiate, and respond to institutional contexts in daily administrative work. The study makes three contributions to existing scholarship. First, it reconceptualizes bureaucratic performance as a systemic product rather than individual competence, challenging linear and ability-based explanations of bureaucratic effectiveness. Second, it outlines institutional mechanisms that participants describe as mediating the conversion of competence into outcomes. Third, it introduces the notion of institutionally rational underperformance, suggesting actions typically viewed as inefficient may, under specific institutional conditions, represent rational adaptations to environments with asymmetric risk, limited performance autonomy, and low-performance incentives.

Literature Review

Reframing Meritocracy: Beyond Competence-Performance Linearity

Contemporary bureaucratic systems normatively ground themselves in meritocracy, assuming competitive recruitment identifies individuals with high cognitive ability, technical knowledge, and administrative potential. Existing literature identifies merit-based recruitment as among the most effective approaches for achieving better governance outcomes including reduced corruption, increased administrative capacity, and more effective policy implementation (Dahlstrom & Lapuente, 2017; Evans & Rauch, 2000). This tradition rests on an unquestioned assumption that competence, once selected, translates into performance through organizational deployment. This linear assumption is rooted in Weberian rational-legal bureaucracy theory, wherein rule-based structure and hierarchy facilitate predictable and efficient administration (Weber, 1978). Yet accumulating empirical evidence challenges this assumption. Even where meritocratic systems enhance input quality, equally effective outputs do not necessarily follow. Existing literature typically interprets this discrepancy as implementation deficit, thus under-theorizing what constitutes a more fundamental conceptual problem. This paper argues that the competence-performance relationship is neither linear nor contextually contingent, requiring reconceptualization beyond input-centric explanations.

Ontological and Epistemological Foundations of Bureaucratic Competence

Understanding the competence-performance gap requires engagement with philosophical foundations of bureaucratic organization. Bureaucracy ontologically constitutes an

institutionalized social order determined through rules, hierarchies, and embedded normative structures. While Weber's approach emphasizes formal rationality and predictability, subsequent organizational scholarship demonstrates bureaucracies operate through complex interrelationships between formal procedures, informal practices, and culturally embedded expectations. Organizational outcomes thus emerge from relational and systemic processes rather than individual ability alone. Epistemologically, existing recruitment frameworks prioritize codified, cognitive knowledge such as law, economics, and policy analysis as proxies for competence. However, knowledge forms not easily captured by examination-based evaluation, including tacit and experiential knowledge, political judgment and situational awareness, leadership and coordination capacity, negotiation and conflict management skills, remain critical to administrative performance. This constitutes a fundamental dimension of the gap, suggesting epistemic reductionism in bureaucratic selection systems.

Bureaucratic Rationality and Institutional Reconstitution of Action

Organizational scholarships have long recognized limitations of bureaucratic rationality. Weber himself acknowledged formal rationality underlying bureaucratic organizations can generate rigidity inhibiting adaptive action and context sensitivity. Following this understanding, the logic of appropriateness, where action is guided not by instrumental calculation but by conformity to institutional norms and roles, conceptualizes organizational behavior (March & Olsen, 1989). Modern scholarship develops this criticism, demonstrating bureaucracy often prioritizes procedural legitimacy over substantive performance, yielding rule-bound inertia and compliance-oriented behavior (Olsen, 2010; Peters, 2002). Nevertheless, critical analytical gaps remain. Existing literature largely views institutions as background to action without sufficiently describing how institutional settings transform the meaning of competence itself and its relationship to performance. The present research contributes by demonstrating how institutional contexts do not simply limit behavior but reconstitute competence into procedural conformity, thereby altering its operational relevance for performance construction.

Performance in Organizations: Towards Multidimensional Systemic Framework

Organizational behavior literature has consistently criticized ability-based performance models. Campbell et al. (1993) conceptualize performance as a function of multiple interacting determinants including knowledge, skills, motivation, and contextual conditions. Subsequent performance theory development supports this multidimensional perspective (Campbell & Wiernik, 2015). Simultaneously, public administration scholarship highlights motivational principles of bureaucratic conduct. Public service motivation (PSM) research demonstrates intrinsic drivers like commitment to public values significantly influence performance (Perry & Wise, 1990). However, empirical research indicates this motivation remains contingent on environment and attenuates where incentives, autonomy, and procedural flexibility are absent (Perry et al., 2010; Belle, 2013). Evidence increasingly

demonstrates importance of contextual and structural facilitators beyond ability and motivation. Research in public management and organization theory identifies influence of opportunity structures such as discretion, resource access, and decision-making space in translating competence into action (Boyne, 2003; Rainey, 2009). Similarly, performance management literature highlights incentives, feedback mechanisms, and organizational climate in shaping behavioral responses and outcomes (Nielsen, 2014; Moynihan & Pandey, 2007). Despite these developments, literature remains analytically fragmented, with explanatory variables typically examined in isolation rather than as interacting components of broader systems.

Organizational Socialization and Professional Identity Transformation

Substantial literature examines processes by which individuals adapt to organizational settings. Van Maanen and Schein (1979) define socialization as internalization of norms, values, and attitudes. Ashforth et al. (2007) highlight how values, informal norms, peer relations, and cultural expectations shape behavioral norms. Such processes typically create alignment between individual behavior and organizational expectations, often at cost of innovation and discretionary initiative. Bourdieu's concept of habitus provides analytically penetrating theorization of how actors come to perceive and act their roles (Bourdieu, 1990). In bureaucracy, this means conformity becomes not merely strategic but is enshrined as taken-for-granted practice, predisposing actors to system-congruent action and reproducing institutional logics through routine action. This study extends literature by demonstrating administrative socialization does not simply align behavior but reconstitutes competence toward conformity, thus limiting effective use of capability. Street-level bureaucracy scholarship similarly examines how frontline officials exercise discretion and cope with resource constraints, often developing coping mechanisms that deviate from formal policy intentions (Lipsky, 1980). This literature is particularly relevant to findings on constrained agency and strategic effort adjustment.

Political-Administrative Relations and Conditionality of Performance

Bureaucratic-political system relationships have long been central to public administration theory. Evans' concept of embedded autonomy reflects dual bureaucratic imperative: professional competence combined with responsiveness to political authority. Contemporary literature emphasizes bureaucratic action as relational and negotiated, predetermined by political expectations, power structures, and institutional forms (Peters, 2002; Fukuyama, 2013). Empirical research confirms political interference, ambiguity, and shifting priorities can severely limit bureaucratic decision-making (Yang & Pandey, 2008; Meyer-Sahling & Mikkelsen, 2016). While this literature effectively captures political conditioning of bureaucratic action, it has not effectively interrogated interaction of such dynamics on competence and performance realization. This study contributes by demonstrating political environment structures opportunity conditions, thereby determining whether competence is operationalized or remains dormant.

Risk, Accountability, and Structural Production of Defensive Bureaucracy

Growing literature examines role of accountability regimes and risk environments in shaping bureaucratic behavior. Hood (1991, 2011) highlights unintended side effects of increased accountability including risk aversion and defensive administrative behavior. Subsequent studies of defensive bureaucracy imply civil servants choose courses of action minimizing blame exposure (Moynihan, 2012). Principal-agent theory similarly describes impact of asymmetric incentives in promoting risk-averse or risk-minimizing behavior. This study enhances discussion by introducing Accountability-Induced Risk Asymmetry, asserting bureaucratic systems often feature insignificant punishments for non-performance combined with significant but uncertain punitive measures for proactive or innovative performance. This imbalance yields rational behavioral response of risk avoidance, producing institutionally rational underperformance. The concept of institutionally rational underperformance extends the literature on blame avoidance and defensive bureaucracy by specifically highlighting the structural asymmetry between the costs of action and inaction. While blame avoidance focuses on agent behavior, risk asymmetry draws attention to the institutional design that systematically punishes innovation while tolerating non-performance. Risk asymmetry is thus not merely a perceptual phenomenon but a structural feature of accountability systems that can be redesigned.

Comparative Administrative Practices: Institutional Diversity and Performance

Comparative administrative evidence supports this study's central analytical claim: competence-performance relationships are not fixed but highly contingent on institutional configurations. High-performing bureaucracies demonstrate that while meritocratic entry is necessary, effectiveness requires integration with complementary systems: incentives, accountability, and organizational learning. Singapore's civil service exemplifies systematic reinforcement of meritocracy through competitive compensation, rigorous performance evaluation, anti-corruption enforcement, and institutionalized excellence culture, consistently translating competence into high administrative performance (Quah, 2011; Neo & Chen, 2007). What made Singapore's model particularly effective was the alignment of career progression with demonstrated performance, the creation of dedicated administrative service cadre with elite status, and the institutionalization of continuous learning and adaptation. Similarly, New Zealand and Canada prioritize performance management, adaptive learning, and calibrated accountability, enhancing bureaucratic effort-policy performance connections (Schick, 1996; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017).

East Asian developmental patterns provide further testimony to active institutional design for bureaucratic competence realization. South Korea's transformation from weak bureaucracy to effective developmental apparatus during the 1960s-1980s illustrates how insulating technocratic agencies, aligning career progression with developmental achievement, and maintaining strong state-led economic vision can transform previously weak bureaucracies (Evans, 1995; Kim, 2011). Rwanda's post-1994 administrative reforms emphasize performance contracts, technology-enabled monitoring, and centralized

performance discipline in producing rapid state capacity improvements, albeit in highly controlled political environments (Chemouni, 2014; World Bank, 2020). Georgia's post-2003 reforms highlight transformative potential of radical institutional restructuring including dismantling established bureaucratic networks, streamlining procedures, and enforcing strict anti-corruption measures (Bennet, 2011). These cases suggest that coherently aligned institutional environments can activate, maintain, and convert competence into measurable results, although the specific political conditions enabling such reforms vary considerably across contexts.

Comparative evidence from South Asia and other developing settings offers cautionary insights. India, for instance, attracts highly capable individuals through competitive civil service examinations, yet scholarly analyses document persistent bureaucratic challenges attributed to procedural rigidity, politicization, and misaligned incentives (Mangla, 2022). Similar patterns of administrative constraint appear elsewhere, with research on Eastern European civil services highlighting how politicization can undermine merit-based recruitment (Meyer-Sahling & Mikkelsen, 2016). Bangladesh exhibits hybrid conditions with significant sectoral achievements including digital governance initiatives and girls' education improvements often achieved through arrangements partially bypassing traditional bureaucratic routes, thereby compensating for systemic constraints (Mahmud et al., 2008; World Bank, 2016). These patterns indicate competence alone does not ensure effectiveness; performance depends on institutional arrangements enabling or bypassing structural bottlenecks. Less successful reform initiatives demonstrate pitfalls of excessive focus on formal institutional redesign without considering established informal norms and behavioral logics, yielding implementation gaps despite formal compliance (Andrews, 2013). Overload from simultaneous interventions often reduces focus and overburdens administrative systems. Furthermore, technocratic reforms planned outside political realities fail to take root, while donor-driven agendas lacking local ownership produce shallow or temporary effects (Grindle, 2004; Pritchett et al., 2013). These issues convey important lessons: institutional change is technical, political, and context dependent.

Collectively, comparative views enhance this study's theoretical statement. Meritocratic recruitment is necessary but insufficient; it depends on the broader institutional environment. When incentives align, accountability calibrates, and organizational environments enable, competence activates and translates into performance. Conversely, where institutional conditions create constraint, misalignment, and risk asymmetry, systematic competence attenuation occurs. Comparative evidence suggests that the competence-performance gap can be addressed through comprehensive redesign of institutional architecture governing bureaucratic action, although the specific reforms required will vary by context.

Conceptual Framework, Research Gap, and Positioning

Extensive literature addresses institutional constraints, motivation, organizational socialization, politics, and accountability systems. However, analytical gaps persist in three

important aspects. First, existing work lacks integrated frameworks explaining how these factors interrelate to produce performance outcomes. Second, it inadequately theorizes competence transformation in institutional settings. Third, it insufficiently develops risk asymmetry as a systemic cause of underperformance. This paper fills these gaps by incorporating theoretical strands into a multidimensional performance framework, empirically investigating lived experiences of civil servants through reflexive thematic analysis, introducing institutionally rational underperformance as conceptual contribution, and reframing competence-performance relationships as systemically mediated rather than individually determined.

Drawing on these theoretical strands, this study develops the following multidimensional framework as a sensitizing means for qualitative analysis. The ability component encompasses cognitive, attitudinal, behavioral, and technical competencies recruited through meritocratic selection. Motivation denotes inclination to activate this capacity, potentially intrinsic (public service motivation, professional values) or extrinsic (career advancement, recognition). Opportunity represents scope of action in institutional contexts such as formal discretion, resource access, and informal space for initiative. Incentives include reward-sanction structures shaping behavior through formal mechanisms (promotion, appraisal) or informal cues (peer recognition, blame avoidance). Environment encompasses organizational and political context including administrative culture, leadership orientation, and extent of political interference. Performance emerges from the interaction of these components rather than from individual competence alone. The framework is not intended as a testable model or an empirically established relationship but serves to focus analytical attention on the institutional mechanisms that participants describe as shaping their experiences.

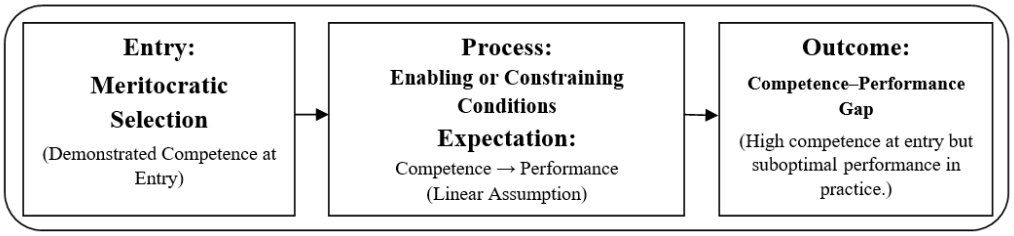

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework Source: Author, 2026

As illustrated in Figure 1, the conceptual framework shows the pathway from meritocratic selection through enabling or constraining institutional conditions to the competence-performance gap. The framework guided the empirical investigation by directing attention to the institutional conditions that participants described as mediating their professional experiences. The enabling or constraining conditions identified through literature and refined through analysis include procedural reconstitution, incentive misalignment, administrative socialization, political conditioning, constrained agency, structural inertia, effort-outcome decoupling, and accountability-induced risk asymmetry.

Study Methods

Philosophical and Methodological Positioning

This study is situated within an interpretivist-constructivist paradigm assuming organizational realities are not objective entities existing independently of actors but are social constructs through interaction, meaning-making, and institutional embeddedness. Bureaucratic performance is treated not as purely measurable output but as experienced, interpreted, and contextually mediated phenomenon influenced by institutional norms, organizational expectations, and political environments. Epistemologically, knowledge is seen as co-construction between researchers and participants. Narratives analyzed are discussed not as objective descriptions of reality but as situated interpretations of experiences. This stance aligns with reflexive orientation described by Braun and Clarke (2019), emphasizing qualitative analysis as interpretive process involving researcher engagement in meaning-making.

Strategy of Inquiry: Reflexive Thematic Analysis

The research employs Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) as formulated by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019). RTA is not mechanistic coding but reflexive, theoretically informed analytic process enabling systematic interpretation of meaning patterns within qualitative data. RTA is selected methodologically for its theoretical flexibility, prefiguration of researcher reflexivity where themes are actively created rather than passively identified, and facilitation of depth analysis enabling exploration of both semantic content and latent meaning structures within participant narratives. Unlike coding reliability techniques prioritizing inter-coder consistency and procedural uniformity, RTA values conceptual consistency, interpretive richness, and analytic transparency.

Ethical Considerations

In accordance with established ethical guidelines for qualitative research, the study adhered to rigorous ethical protocols despite not requiring formal institutional review board approval, as the research topic did not involve vulnerable populations, sensitive personal data, or interventions that would necessitate prior ethical clearance. Nevertheless, all participants were provided with informed consent, which detailed the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, measures to protect confidentiality through composite narratives, and participants' right to withdraw at any time. Given the politically sensitive nature of the topic, additional measures were implemented to safeguard anonymity, including the construction of composite narratives, the removal of identifying details from all accounts, providing participants with the opportunity to review their interview transcripts and request redactions, and securing data storage accessibility only to the research team.

Data Construction and Sampling

Empirical data comprises nine in-depth first-person narratives of civil servants including both serving and retired individuals. Participants were recruited through professional networks and snowball sampling, with initial contacts made through professional associations and personal connections in the civil service. The sample includes five serving officers in mid-level and senior positions and four retired senior bureaucrats with extensive administrative experience. The sample size of nine participants prioritizes depth over breadth and seeks analytical rather than statistical generalization. Participants were purposively selected for their extensive experience and diverse institutional exposure rather than to represent the entire Nepali bureaucracy. The study's findings are therefore presented as analytically generalizable insights that may inform understanding of similar bureaucratic contexts, not as empirically generalizable conclusions about the entire Nepali bureaucracy.

Interviews were conducted in English, with occasional code-switching to Nepali for nuanced expression, and transcribed verbatim. Each participant engaged in 2-3 interview sessions, with each session lasting approximately 90 minutes, allowing for deep exploration of experiences and follow-up clarification. Narratives were constructed through repeated engagement with participants who worked in various administrative settings including district administration, federal and provincial ministries, and policy formulation and implementation positions. Environments feature dense procedural environments, hierarchical decision-making structures, and sustained political engagement.

The semi-structured interview guide included questions such as: How would you describe your experience of transitioning from training to actual administrative practice? What factors enable or constrain your ability to implement what you know? How does the incentive system affect your work motivation? What role do political considerations play in administrative decision-making? How does the accountability system affect your willingness to take initiative?

Participant Characteristics

The participant sample comprised of three retired Secretaries, one retired Joint Secretary, three serving Joint Secretaries, one serving Under-Secretary, and one serving Section Officer. Years of service range from 11 to 35 years, with a mean of approximately 21 years. Two participants were female and seven were male and the functional sectors they represented include Home Affairs, Finance, Education, Health, Agriculture, Energy, and Federal Affairs. This diversity of rank, experience, functional areas, and gender ensures exposure to varied bureaucratic experiences while maintaining analytical focus on common institutional dynamics. Table 1 summarizes participant characteristics:

Table 1: Characteristics of Participants

Participant	Rank	Years of Service	Gender
P1	Under-Secretary	13	Male
P2	Under-Secretary	14	Female
P3	Joint Secretary	18	Male
P4	Joint Secretary	16	Male
P5	Section Officer	11	Male
P6	Secretary	22	Female
P7	Former Secretary	32	Male
P8	Former Secretary	30	Male
P9	Former Secretary	35	Male

Constructed Composite Narratives

Given research sensitivity regarding bureaucratic experiences particularly those involving institutional critique and politics, the study employs constructed composite narratives. These accounts synthesize recurring patterns, phrases, and experiences across participant accounts. This methodology serves dual purposes: protecting confidentiality and ethical safeguards enabling participants to express thoughts without fear of identification, and facilitating analytical abstraction capturing structural and recurrent features of bureaucratic experience rather than fragmentary individual accounts.

The composite narratives were constructed through the following procedure. First, all interview transcripts were thoroughly reviewed to identify recurring patterns, phrases, and experiences across participant accounts. Second, specific verbatim excerpts were selected from individual participants that exemplified these patterns. Third, where necessary, these excerpts were minimally edited for clarity and conciseness while preserving authentic meaning. Fourth, analytical framing paragraphs were crafted to synthesize multiple participants' experiences into a coherent narrative that captures the institutional dynamic under discussion. Importantly, no composite narrative attributed a statement to a participant that no individual participant actually expressed. Each quoted statement is a direct verbatim excerpt from a specific participant, identified by their anonymous participant number, rank, and years of service. The composite narratives provide the analytical context for these excerpts but do not fabricate participant voices.

Analytical Procedure

Analytical process followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework of Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Initial familiarization involved immersion in narratives to detect patterns of meaning, tone, and contextual subtlety. Preliminary coding occurred at both semantic and latent levels. Semantic coding addressed explicit statements about bureaucratic experience, while latent coding addressed underlying assumptions, tensions, and institutional logics present in narratives. Theme construction involved grouping codes into larger groups

representing common patterns of meaning based on theoretical sensitivity ensuring alignment with conceptual framework. Reflexive engagement involved critically interrogating, refining, and reconfiguring emerging themes in consideration of empirical evidence and theoretical constructs. Themes were defined and named reflectively of conceptual importance. Analytical writing was integral to interpretive process where themes were expounded, supported, and integrated into theory.

The following coding framework illustrates how seven analytical themes emerged from the data after consolidation. Initial open codes such as 'rule compliance over substance,' 'procedure as end in itself,' and 'file movement priority' were grouped under the category of procedural reconstitution, which informed the theme of Procedural Reconstitution and Constrained Agency. Codes including 'minimal returns to effort,' 'system does not distinguish performance,' and 'effort adjustment over time' formed the category of motivational flattening, yielding the theme of Misalignment of Incentives and Flattening of Motivational Gradients. Codes such as 'idealism to conformity,' 'learning limits,' and 'not challenging system' constituted the category of normative internalization, informing the theme of Administrative Socialization and Production of Bureaucratic Dispositions. This iterative process, moving between data and theoretical constructs, ensured themes were empirically grounded while analytically meaningful.

Participant-by-Theme Matrix

To enhance transparency, the following matrix in Table 2 shows which participants contributed to each theme. The counts are indicative, not definitive, and do not imply statistical generalizability but provide readers with a sense of theme prevalence within the sample.

Table 2 : Participant by theme Matrix

Theme	Participants Contributing
4.2 Procedural Reconstitution and Constrained Agency	P1, P3, P4, P5, P7, P8, P9
4.3 Misalignment of Incentives and Motivational Flattening	P2, P5, P6, P7, P8
4.4 Administrative Socialization and Bureaucratic Dispositions	P4, P6, P7, P8, P9
4.5 Political Conditioning and Relational Performance	P1, P3, P6, P8
4.6 Structural Inertia and Temporal Regulation	P5, P7, P8
4.7 Effort-Outcome Decoupling	P4, P7, P9
4.8 Accountability-Induced Risk Asymmetry	P1, P2, P5, P7, P8, P9

Trustworthiness and Analytical Rigor

Qualitative rigor is achieved through trustworthiness criteria modified for interpretivist paradigm. Credibility is attained through thick description and prolonged engagement with empirical material and literature. Dependability is provided through transparency in analytical process with theme development clearly documented. Confirmability is addressed

through explicit recognition of researcher's interpretive role, foregrounding reflexivity rather than claiming objectivity. Transferability is attained not through statistical generalization but conceptual generalization whereby analytical insights inform knowledge about similar bureaucratic situations beyond immediate empirical context.

Reflexivity is upheld as critical methodological commitment. The researcher acknowledges positionality as a scholar in the public administration field with prior exposure to Nepal's bureaucratic system. This prior knowledge shaped research design and theoretical framing. The researcher had no prior professional relationship with any participant, and participants were recruited through professional networks rather than personal connections. Assumptions about Nepal's bureaucracy, including the expectation that institutional constraints might mediate performance, were held consciously and critically examined throughout the analysis. These assumptions were tested against participant accounts, and themes were developed iteratively to ensure they reflected participant's experiences rather than researcher preconceptions. The researcher's interpretive role is acknowledged as constitutive of the analytical process, and reflexivity is treated as an analytical tool enabling deeper engagement with data and more sophisticated interpretation of meaning.

Results and Discussion

Putting the Empirical Pattern in Frame: Competence as Capacity to Competence as Conditioned Practice

Empirical analysis reveals a consistent and theoretically consequential pattern: competence, although consistently demonstrated at bureaucratic entry, does not function as autonomous driver of performance according to participants' accounts. Instead, participants described how competence is gradually conditioned, mediated, and reconstituted through interaction with institutional structures, incentive regimes, organizational culture, and political environments. Participants did not describe lack of ability but rather systematic recalibration of conditions under which competence can be exercised and whether exercising it is advisable in any given circumstance. This reframing shifts analytical focus from individual capability to institutional mediation, implying the competence-performance relationship is neither linear nor direct and is structurally produced.

Procedural Reconstitution and Constrained Agency

Participants consistently described how the meaning of competent behavior is not merely controlled by institutional arrangements in bureaucracy but is formed by them. Empirical content suggests what is identified and reinforced as competence definition is filtered by procedural architectures prioritizing rule-following over substantive problem-solving. Competence is not a given quality individuals bring to organizations but is created in context of what organizations make visible, acceptable, and actionable. This is clearly illustrated in narratives emphasizing primacy of procedural acceptability over substantive correctness. According to one mid-career civil servant (Participant 3, Joint Secretary, 18

years of service): *'You may have the best idea, but unless it fits within the file movement system and established procedures, it does not move. It is not about what is right; it is about what is acceptable within the process.'* A retired senior official (Participant 7, Former Secretary, over 30 years of service) further clarified evaluative logic: *'Our system hardly rewards initiative; it only rewards correctness. And unfortunately, correctness is defined procedurally, not substantively.'*

Participants further expressed limited discretionary space, demonstrating agency is bounded by structural constraints. A mid-career officer (Participant 1, Under-Secretary, 13 years of service) reflected: *'You may want to push for change, but the system defines how far you can go. And this, I must say, is a bitter reality.'* Another participant (Participant 3, Joint Secretary, 18 years of service) noted: *'By the time your idea passes through approvals, it is no longer your idea.'* These remarks show bureaucratic actions are refracted through multiple authorization systems and procedural vetting, often resulting in sizing, reshaping, or recasting original ideas. Initiative is subject to change processes losing immediacy and ownership. Individual agencies are channeled into organizational structures where individuality and impact are limited.

Theoretically, this pattern is explained by logic of appropriateness where actors in organizations shape behavior according to rule-consistent norms rather than outcome-maximizing calculations (March & Olsen, 1989). Results align with Weber's formal rationality analysis where bureaucratic systems transform rule compliance into value of its own, often unrelated to substantive goals (Weber, 1978). More recent institutional scholarship implies organizations prioritize procedural legitimacy over instrumental effectiveness, shaping both content and expression of action (Olsen, 2010; Peters, 2002). Institutions do not simply restrain behavior but define possible action sets available to actors. Street-level bureaucracy literature similarly emphasizes how frontline officials cope with resource constraints and procedural demands through various adaptation strategies (Lipsky, 1980). Combined, these views illuminate structural transformation where competence is not just restrained but reformulated as compliance. Analytical implication: individuals are not incapable; rather, institutional definition of competent action limits forms in which ability can be legitimately expressed.

Misalignment of Incentives and Flattening of Motivational Gradients

The second dynamic concerns incentive systems and their deficiency in maintaining motivational differentiation in bureaucracy. Incentive systems do not simply influence individual behavior; they shape intensity and differentiation of effort exerted, ultimately determining whether performance is acknowledged and rewarded. Empirical data reveals systematic erosion of motivational gradients where differences between high and low effort are institutionally silenced. Competence will not produce proportional effort since the system hardly provides feedback rewarding greater effort proportionately. This is exhibited in participant experiences reflecting experiential awareness of minimal returns to discretionary extra effort. A serving

officer (Participant 2, Under-Secretary, 14 years of service) reflected: *'Whether you work beyond expectations or just follow routine, the system does not distinguish much. Over time, you adjust your effort accordingly.'* Another participant (Participant 5, Section Officer, 11 years of service) noted: *'I did not find any strong reason to stretch myself. When you repeatedly realize that the system neither penalizes low performance nor significantly rewards high performance, what is the point of putting extra energy?'*

These narratives indicate what can be analytically defined as motivational flattening, where marginal utility of extra effort approaches zero. Competence is not absent but is moderated strategically; people adjust effort levels to conform to institutional cues that do not reward excellence but only penalize minimum compliance. Outcome is rational effort adjustment where high ability combines with deliberately optimized rather than maximized performance. Theoretically, this motivational flattening resonates with Yang and Pandey's (2008) finding that bureaucratic structure negatively affects normative commitment, suggesting that when employees perceive their efforts are neither recognized nor rewarded within rigid hierarchical systems, their psychological attachment to the organization diminishes progressively. This finding extends public service motivation literature by showing intrinsic motivation is institutionally conditioned and prone to attenuation in environments with weak or non-differentiated incentives (Perry & Wise, 1990). This is particularly significant in non-Western contexts where PSM may interact differently with institutional constraints (Vandenabeele, 2011; Ritz et al., 2016). It aligns with broader critiques of public management regimes emphasizing inadequacy of performance differentiation underpinning behavioral responsiveness and effort allocation (Hood, 1991). From organizational view, this dynamic represents failure of effort-reward connection central to performance theory where motivation to continue depends on perceived significance of effort consequences. This implies that competence requires motivational activation, but institutional arrangements systematically dampen activation, leading to underutilization of available capability and normalization of calibrated rather than optimal performance.

Administrative Socialization and Production of Bureaucratic Dispositions

Participants provided accounts of gradual yet significant shift in work orientation characterized by transformation of initial idealism into pragmatic conformity. Administrative socialization is not simply organizational adjustment but process through which bureaucratic dispositions are produced, stabilized, and reproduced over time. Empirical evidence indicates entry-level orientations, often idealistic, creative, and reformist, are gradually but consequentially changed as individuals enter lived realities of bureaucratic practice. This change is gradual, resulting from continuous exposure to institutional demands redefining what is appropriate, feasible, and professionally prudent. This redefinition is expressed in participant reflections capturing experiential turn from aspirational engagement to pragmatic conformity. A retired senior official (Participant 9, Former Secretary, 35 years of service) reflected: *'In training, we were motivated to think outside the box but as soon as you get into the system, you are soon taught what is acceptable and what is not.'* A mid-career officer (Participant 4, Joint

Secretary, 16 years of service) noted: *'You begin with energy and ideas, but over time you understand the limits. You learn not to challenge the system unnecessarily.'*

These accounts reveal behavioral conformity is achieved not only through formal sanctions or hierarchical control but through informal sanctions, modeling, and implicit reinforcement. Bureaucratic actors become oriented toward institutional survival where prudence, caution, and situational awareness are prioritized over initiative and experimentation. Competence is not abandoned but selectively applied within boundaries regarded as safe and legitimate. Theoretically, this dynamic reflects organizational socialization models describing acquisition of norms and expectations needed for effective role performance (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Findings extend this perspective by engaging with Bourdieu's concept of habitus as system of durable, transposable dispositions structuring perception and practice (Bourdieu, 1990). Bureaucrats do not simply reflect institutional norms but embody them, reproducing system logic in action.

Political Conditioning and Relational Nature of Performance

Participants described bureaucratic performance as not merely technical function but relational achievement conditioned by political circumstances. Political conditioning proves constitutive of bureaucratic performance, demonstrating effectiveness is not merely technical facility but relational success negotiated within political environments. Empirical data shows bureaucratic action is constantly reviewed regarding changing political expectations, so decision validity rests not only on technical soundness but political acceptability. This relational dynamic is presented in participant accounts prefiguring need for political calibration in administrative practice. A serving senior official (Participant 6, Secretary, 22 years of service) observed: *'A technically sound decision is not always implementable. You must consider how it will be perceived politically.'* A retired bureaucrat (Participant 8, Former Secretary, 30 years of service) noted: *'Let me be clear to you; administrative decisions must align with political expectations to survive.'*

These accounts show bureaucratic competence must be offset by political ideologies and thought processes. Bureaucrats must foresee reactions, handle sensibilities, and position actions strategically within reasonable political limits. Effectiveness cannot be defined merely by analytical rigor but by possibility of converting analytical rigor into politically feasible forms, often requiring compromise, selective framing, or restraint. Theoretically, this finding is explained by Evans' embedded autonomy theory emphasizing dual demands on bureaucrats: technical capability and political responsiveness (Evans, 1995). Analysis indicates more restrictive form where political considerations do not simply limit action possibilities but play more decisive role. This aligns with broader institutional views conceptualizing bureaucratic behavior as relationally organized and contingent on power relations and governance systems (Peters, 2002; Fukuyama, 2013). Analytical implication: performance becomes conditional rather than intrinsic; competence alone is inadequate and must be transformed into politically acceptable action, strengthening dependency of

bureaucratic performance on interaction between administrative expertise and political context.

Structural Inertia and Temporal Regulation of Performance

A recurring theme concerns temporal limits imposed on bureaucratic action. Structural inertia appears as resistance to change and temporal regime dictating speed and direction of bureaucratic action. Empirical material suggests performance is not necessarily limited by rules or hierarchy but by pace of institutional processes restricting performance. Personal effort is utilized in organizational schedules, mostly independent and resistant to acceleration. This temporal conditioning is defined through participant reflections depicting experiential limit of effort. A retired senior official (Participant 7, Former Secretary, over 30 years of service) offered a vivid metaphor: *'Performance in bureaucracy is like running furiously inside a train running at 40 km per hour. No one can reach the destination ahead of the train, no matter how competent we are.'* A serving officer (Participant 5, Section Officer, 11 years of service) noted: *'You can push things faster, but the system processes them at its own speed.'*

These accounts present organizational decoupling between effort intensity and result speed. Individual acceleration fails to produce proportional system-level acceleration, resulting in temporally limited agency. Theoretically, this resembles literature on path dependency and institutional inertia highlighting established routines and historical tracks creating self-reinforcing constraints on organizational change and responsiveness (North, 1990; Peters, 2002). Institutions build systemic velocity where processes cannot easily accelerate without structural change. Analytical implication: performance is time-limited; competence can increase efforts but cannot exceed institutional system processing capacity.

Effort-Outcome Decoupling and Fragmentation of Causality

Participants reported absence of connection between input and observable outcome, indicating break in assumed cause-effect relationship. Results indicate alleged linearity between effort and outcome is repeatedly violated, suggesting bureaucratic performance is characterized by causal indeterminacy rather than causal predictability. A serving officer (Participant 4, Joint Secretary, 16 years of service) observed: *'Sometimes the most effort goes into work that, in fact, never gets implemented.'* A retired bureaucrat (Participant 9, Former Secretary, 35 years of service) reflected: *'Outcomes depend more on system alignment than individual contribution.'*

These reports reveal scenarios where cause-effect relationships are obscured by intervention of multiple factors including procedural layers, organizational dependencies, and changing political priorities. Individual behavior constitutes one of many outcome causes typically diluted or redirected through system-based processes. Disconnection between input and output does not prevent competence but prevents effective operation. Theoretically, this resembles decoupling theories in organizational literature focusing on gaps between organizational

activities and resulting outcomes in complex institutional situations (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Bromley & Powell, 2012). It also relates to public management literature suggesting public sector performance is explained by multiple contingency factors (Boyne, 2003). Analytical implication: where effort and consequence are loosely coupled, rationality of achieving high performance becomes questionable.

Accountability-Induced Risk Asymmetry and Rationalization of Underperformance

A key finding emerging from participant accounts is the perception of asymmetrical accountability systems that appear to change incentive structures of behavior toward risk management rather than performance orientation. Participants consistently referenced environments where consequences of action outweigh consequences of inaction. A mid-career officer (Participant 2, Under-Secretary, 14 years of service) noted: *'If you do nothing, nothing happens to you. But if you act, you risk being questioned.'* A retired senior official (Participant 8, Former Secretary, 30 years of service) reflected: *'The cost of not performing is almost zero, but performing differently can carry serious consequences.'*

These accounts reveal perceived risk asymmetry where institutional arrangements appear to systematically differentiate risk profiles of action and inaction. Participants perceived that non-performance is practically barred from punishment while active or creative action subjects actors to uncertain and frequently penal treatment. Competence is strategically controlled as people consider visibility costs against limited performance rewards. Theoretically, this dynamic extends defensive bureaucracy and principal-agent literature focusing on how accountability pressures and asymmetric information shape agent behavior (Hood, 1991, 2011; Moynihan, 2012). The findings suggest that risk asymmetry is perceived as institutionally generated rather than merely an individual perception, yielding what may be described as institutionally rational underperformance where abilities are controlled to achieve safety rather than effectiveness. While these findings establish participants' interpretations, documentary, observational, or comparative evidence would be needed to substantiate causation.

Integrative Synthesis: Towards Systemic Understanding of Bureaucratic Performance

Collectively, findings indicate a complete reversal from individualistic to systematic approach to bureaucratic performance. Performance cannot be defined by ability to access some internal trait. Rather, performance results from interaction between various institutions. Competence manifested at bureaucratic entry exists in potential form but does not automatically translate into administrative achievements.

The analysis reveals a sequential and interacting process through which competence is attenuated. At first level, competence is procedurally redefined: institutional regulations and formalized procedures redefine problem-solving ability in compliance-oriented terms.

This is followed by motivational attenuation where weak incentive systems flatten returns to effort, undermining willingness to deploy competence beyond minimum thresholds. Simultaneously, normative internalization transforms behavioral orientations as bureaucrats internalize and reproduce organizational expectations toward confirmative rather than initiating behavior. These organizational dynamics are compounded by political conditioning where action viability is conditioned by political expectation alignment. Competence must be redefined to work within relational parameters rather than purely technical terms. Structural bounding restricts individual agency through hierarchy and approval limits diluting direct effect of individual agency. Temporal regulation imposes systemic constraints on action speed and direction. Causal decoupling obscures competence-effort relationships, undermining assumption that competence and effort increase yield proportionate outcomes. All processes culminate in structuring effect of risk asymmetry fundamentally altering action calculus. Where non-performance costs are insignificant and proactive performance risks are significant and uncertain, rational actors are systematically incentivized to avoid risk.

These mechanisms are not isolated but mutually reinforcing. Procedural reconstitution and constrained agency create the institutional environment within which incentives are misaligned, socialization occurs, and risk asymmetry operates. Risk asymmetry compounds the effects of other constraints by making proactive behavior disproportionately costly. The cumulative effect is a systematic transformation of potential competence into institutionally constrained action.

Bureaucratic performance should be thought of as emergent attribute of institutional ecosystem, not direct manifestation of individual ability. The competence-performance gap is not anomalous but structurally generated, reflecting cumulative impact of institutional configurations constraining, reinterpreting, and risk-loading competence enactment.

Conclusion and Implications

This study investigates how experienced Nepali civil servants perceive institutional barriers that mediate the relationship between entry competence and administrative performance. Using an interpretivist-constructivist paradigm and reflexive thematic analysis, the research demonstrates that participants perceive performance not as a natural consequence of individual competence but as a systemically mediated phenomenon shaped by motivation, opportunity, incentives, and institutional environment. Competence is progressively reconstituted through procedural redefinition, motivational attenuation, normative internalization, political conditioning, structural bounding, temporal regulation, causal decoupling, and accountability-induced risk asymmetry. These conditions produce what the study conceptualizes as institutionally rational underperformance, a behavior reflecting rational adaptation to institutional configurations where action risks exceed action rewards rather than individual deficiency. Participants' accounts suggest institutional conditions may

mediate the enactment of competence, and the competence-performance gap is therefore best understood as structurally produced, with bureaucratic performance emerging as a property of institutional arrangements rather than individual capability.

This calls for reorienting bureaucratic performance theorization by challenging linear, ability-based models and proposing a multidimensional interactional framework where performance depends on alignment of institutional variables. The research integrates institutional theory, organizational behavior, and public administration into a unified explanatory framework while introducing accountability-induced risk asymmetry as a theoretical advance linking institutional accountability structures to behavioral outcomes. Conceptualizing underperformance as institutionally rational shifts analytical focus toward structural conditions rather than normative deficiency.

Scholars should pursue comparative and multi-level studies examining how institutional design differences across administrative systems shape competence-performance relationships. Longitudinal studies could illuminate how bureaucratic socialization and institutional incentives influence behavioral trajectories. Risk asymmetry warrants operationalization and empirical testing across accountability regimes. Methodologically, interpretive approaches like reflexive thematic analysis should supplement large-N performance studies.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample size of nine participants, while appropriate for an in-depth qualitative study, limits the generalizability of findings. The study prioritizes analytical rather than statistical generalization, and findings are presented as insights that may inform understanding of similar contexts rather than as empirically generalizable conclusions about the entire Nepali bureaucracy. Second, the sample is weighted toward senior officials, which may not reflect the experiences of junior civil servants who may face different institutional constraints. Third, the sample includes only two women, limiting gender-based analysis. Fourth, the study is based on a single-country context, and findings may not generalize to other administrative systems with different institutional arrangements. Fifth, the use of composite narratives, while methodologically justified for ethical reasons, limits readers' ability to trace specific claims to specific participants, though the participant-by-theme matrix provides some transparency. Sixth, the study relies on participants' perceptions and recall rather than objective measures of competence or performance. The study has identified perceived institutional mechanisms that participants describe as mediating their professional experiences, but it has not independently measured competence or performance. Finally, the cross-sectional design captures perceptions at a single point in time and cannot establish causal relationships. Future research with longitudinal designs, larger and more diverse samples, and objective performance measures could build on these findings.

Lessons for Capacity Building Institutions

For capacity building institutions in Nepal, the findings suggest several implications. While this study did not directly examine specific training programmes or institutional roles, the evidence on mechanisms that attenuate competence suggests that capacity building institutions may need to expand their focus beyond individual training to include engagement with the broader institutional environment. Participants consistently described how procedural rigidities, incentive misalignments, political pressures, and accountability asymmetries reconstitute competence into constrained action. The findings imply that capacity building institutions could consider a strategic reorientation from training providers to institutional architects across three interconnected domains.

First, in curriculum redesign, institutions might move toward what this study terms institutional literacy, equipping civil servants not merely with technical knowledge but with the capacity to navigate institutional constraints. Drawing on adult learning literature (Knowles et al., 2015), training could incorporate action-learning projects analyzing real constraints, supervisory transfer agreements to enhance workplace application (Baldwin & Ford, 1988), and alumni networks for ongoing peer support. Second, in institutional engagement, institutions might extend beyond individual to systemic capacity building, piloting reforms in incentive structures, accountability regimes, and procedural architectures. Drawing on workplace-support literature (Holton et al., 2000), they could develop coaching and mentoring programs, positioning themselves as laboratories for institutional innovation experimenting with peer recognition systems, performance-based promotions, and feedback mechanisms. Third, in systemic advocacy, institutions might leverage their authority to influence policy dialogue, articulating evidence-based messages that reform efforts narrowly focused on recruitment are insufficient and advocating for comprehensive reform addressing the entire performance ecosystem. The success of capacity building institutions might be measured not by the number trained but by the extent interventions reshape institutional conditions enabling competence to translate into performance, using frameworks including behavioral change assessments and participant tracking (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006). The competence-performance gap represents a significant governance challenge. The question before capacity building institutions is not whether they can afford transformation, but whether they can afford not to consider this broader institutional role. Even modest steps; institutional diagnostics, alumni networks, or piloting new approaches, could contribute to bridging the gap.

Data Availability Statement

Audit trails data are available upon request, subject to confidentiality and anonymity adherence mentioned in methodology section.

Declaration of Interest

There are no competing interests relevant to this article.

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Declaration of Generative AI Use

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Research Article

AI and Expert Perspectives: A Comparative Analysis on Training Needs Assessment of Sudurpaschim Province

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Abstract

Training Need Assessment (TNA) is one of the critical functions of human resource capacity development within the organization. However, the expert-based approaches appear to be comparatively more time-consuming, costly and susceptible to subjective biases. Therefore, this study presents a comparative study between AI-based and expert-based training need assessment within a public institution context, particularly of Sudurpaschim Province, Nepal. In this study, a mixed research approach has been employed to evaluate the quality, time and cost involved in conducting both types of TNA and stakeholders' acceptance towards AI-generated TNA. The quality of both TNA reports has been assessed through Goldstein & Ford model for TNA evaluation, while ISTAM (Intelligent Systems Technology Acceptance Model) has been employed to measure stakeholder acceptability of AI-generated TNA. The findings reveal that the quality of AI-based TNA is nearly comparable with expert-based TNA in organizational analysis. However, it shows significant differences in task/KSA analysis and person analysis. Expert TNA has an overall score of 74 percent, whereas AI TNA scores 67 percent. Furthermore, AI TNA takes 50.71 percent less time and 74.34 percent lower costs, but it achieves moderate stakeholder acceptance (66.57/100). The study recommends a blended approach where AI supports efficiency while human experts provide contextual depth and empirical grounding.

Keywords: Training Needs Assessment, Artificial Intelligence, ISTAM, Goldstein and Ford, Hybrid Approach

Introduction

Training Needs Assessment (TNA) is an important function of human resource development and institutional capacity building to increase organisational effectiveness and productivity (Becker, 1964). Historically, trained personnel including trainers, managers and subject specialists have carried out TNA within the Nepali public sector using both qualitative and quantitative techniques like surveys, performance assessments, and interviews to analyze the results for determining needs. Nevertheless, the process is highly subjective and takes

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time to adjust to changing demands, and hence, is not able to address the evolving digital skills requirement of the public administration.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is not a new concept. The theories behind artificial intelligence have been around for the last seven decades, applied by computer scientists such as Alan Turing, Marvin Minsky, and John McCarthy. AI offers the benefit of lower cost of data storage and higher computing power. Hence, many organizations are willing to unlock their value trapped in a huge and vast volume of data through AI. AI is a collection of technologies that enable machines to act with higher levels of intelligence and emulate human capabilities of sense, comprehension and act (NITI Aayog). AI offers a new paradigm to every sector, including training institutions. With the help of technologies such as machine learning, natural language processing, and predictive analysis, artificial intelligence will be able to recognize skill gaps and provide recommendations while minimizing subjective influence (Davenport & Ronanki, 2018). Moreover, the application of artificial intelligence in HR development is growing from recruitment processes, performance appraisal to tailored training (Davenport & Ronanki, 2018).

Nepal's 16th Five-Year Plan (2081/82-2085/86) strategically addresses structural obstacles in Nepal's development by integrating new technologies and management methods grounded in research and development. In this, AI acts as a bridge to achieve transformative change. The 16th Plan has acknowledged the development of AI research centers and the adoption of AI-driven e-governance and digitalization. The plan further prioritizes human resource development to cultivate a skilled workforce for the digital era. Similarly, the National AI Policy is intended to bolster by institutionalizing AI education, vocational training and capacity building programs. The National AI Policy approved by the Government of Nepal in August 2025 is an important milestone towards ethical and inclusive AI (Government of Nepal, 2025). This policy aligns with the Digital Nepal Framework (2019) and 16th Plan's vision of a knowledge-driven economy (Government of Nepal, 2019; National Planning Commission, 2024). However, there are few empirical studies validating AI in public sector applications such as TNA.

The emerging global issue of data colonialism, where developing countries turn out to be passive data providers to AI systems managed by other countries, is a matter of grave concern. According to the findings of PwC (2017) and Harari (2024), nearly 70 percent of AI's projected $15.7 trillion global value by 2030 will concentrate in China and North America, further escalating the divide between data-rich and data-poor countries. Against this backdrop, using AI without strong local governance may increase dependency and inequity instead of empowerment. Thinkers like Harari (2024), Suleyman (2025), and Tegmark (2017) have examined how large language models operate, and caution against treating these systems as autonomous decision makers in stable situations where data are easily available. However, AI falls short and cannot adapt to uncertain situations where there is lack of data. In this regard, A large language model processes text by breaking it into tokens and learning,

from patterns across billions of documents. In this, words and phrases are statistically likely to follow one another. On this basis, it generates a range of plausible continuations and, in effect, "bases sensible actions on those predictions" rather than exercising independent judgement (Suleyman & Bhaskar, 2025). Tegmark (2017) similarly observes that although such models can pass the Turing Test. They discover patterns and relations among words without relating these words to anything in the real world, and they continue to struggle with common sense reasoning, as shown by the Winograd Schema Challenge. This distinction has profound meaning for public administration indicating current LLMs are best understood as decision support tools that generate probabilistic, pattern-based outputs for human review, not as decision makers that reason or act independently. Even so, there are limited studies to prove whether AI can match or excel the efficiency, accuracy, conceptual depth, and practical value of human judgement. This raises critical questions for Nepal's public administration particularly in TNA: Can AI truly understand contextual nuances and human learning needs? Should training decisions in the public sector rely on algorithmic judgement? Therefore, it is imperative for countries like Nepal to conduct research on AI in various domains like TNAs to understand the efficacy of AI.

This study is relevant for several reasons. First, it offers novel empirical research on the comparative study of expert-led and AI-driven TNA within Nepal's public sector context, addressing a critical gap in organizational capacity building. Second, the findings of the study will provide evidence for policymakers and training institutions on the use of AI tools for training needs analysis. AI helps institutions to optimize time, cost and human resources without compromising quality. Third, the study is valuable for the wider discussion about digitalization in public sector HRM practices, providing insights on how AI can augment human capability instead of replacing them. Finally, by examining stakeholder acceptability in AI-generated TNA, the study highlights practical considerations for implementation, ensuring that AI-driven TNAs are actionable and contextually appropriate.The general objective of this study is to conduct a comparative analysis of AI-based and expert-driven TNA of Sudurpaschim Province. Specifically, the study aims to: (1) compare the quality of TNA between expert and AI versions; (2) compare the time and cost required for each approach; and (3) measure stakeholder acceptability of AI-generated TNA.The study is guided by two research questions: How do quality, cost and time differ between the two methods? And how do stakeholders accept AI-driven TNA compared to expert-driven ones?

Literature Review

Artificial Intelligence and Its Landscape in Nepal

Albaladejo-González et al. (2024) claimed that AI is advancing in training and assessment. However, AI is not fully implementable because most of the ideas are in the research stage. Chen (2022) suggested that AI systems in training can shift the stages of knowledge base construction, surveys, training structuring and feedback processes. In the context of training, large language models could process large volumes of words and translate and

summarize them, a capacity which was exclusive to human skills. Furthermore, machine learning models can predict the kind of skills needed in the future (Bessen, 2019). However, Suleyman and Bhaskar (2025) suggested that AI should not replace human contact or ability, but the safety of AI should be continually enacted. Tegmark (2017) asserts that though AI can pass the Turing Test, it does not clearly understand context. Also, AI is not very good at common sense tasks which is proven through Winograd Schema Challenge.

AI technology in Nepal is still at an early stage. According to the AI Readiness Index 2024, Nepal is ranked 150 out of 188 countries. The National Artificial Intelligence Policy 2082 established artificial intelligence as a computer system that can reason, engage in decision-making, problem-solving, and learning like humans. The adoption of National AI Policy 2082, Digital Nepal Vision 2023 and the Sixteenth Five Year Plan 2081/82-2085/86 hints at Nepal's commitment toward incorporating AI across governance structures, public service delivery including human resource development (Government of Nepal, 2025; National Planning Commission, 2024). The policy makes provisions to establish key institutions including AI Supervision Council, National AI Center, and the AI Regulatory Authority and prioritizes sectorial implementation of AI-enhanced public services and for HR upskilling. However, the policy efforts do not align with empirical findings of AI in a provincial context. As per a study by Mahat (2024) in Ramechhap district, despite being positive about the potential of AI, the public servants are concerned about infrastructure readiness and digital literacy.

On the contrary, the AI policy landscape is geopolitically divided. Considering this, Nepal must develop its own regulatory strategy that incorporates international best practices and be agile enough to accommodate local requirements (Kushwaha et al., 2025). Without proper local governance structures that empirically test AI technologies, Nepal would largely remain trapped in perpetual dependence rather than enabling its own indigenous capacity (Malhotra, 2021).More broadly, recent research on AI adoption across public organizations points to organizational readiness, resources, skills, and governance arrangements as key determinants of successful implementation, rather than the technical sophistication of the AI system alone (Neumann et al., 2024). This reinforces the argument that Nepal's institutional and regulatory preparedness, not just AI availability, will determine whether public sector applications such as TNA can be responsibly scaled.

Training Needs Assessment: Theory and Practice

Training Needs Assessment is defined as the process of determining the discrepancy between the current and desired level of performance and finding ways to bridge the gap by educational intervention (McGehee & Thayer, 1961). Generally, Training Needs Assessment involves three layers of analysis: organizational, task, and individual (Goldstein & Ford, 2002). Traditional TNA processes, guided by an expert, have strong reliance on personal judgement, contextual understanding and tacit knowledge while being highly prone to bias and inconsistency (Brown, 2002). On the other hand, AI could be used to discover the

trainee characteristics and tailor learning programs based on their unique KSAs, eliminating human bias (Maity, 2019).

AI's comparative weakness in task/KSA and person analysis, established later in this study's findings, is consistent with the nature of tacit knowledge itself. Knowledge that experts hold but rarely document explicitly. The knowledge on structured task inventories, direct observation of current behavior, and iterative interaction cannot be documented explicitly in the text alone. Task and KSA analysis require judgement about the frequency, importance and difficulty of tasks that are difficult to extract from documentation. Similarly, person analysis depends on contextual intelligence, intuition, behavioral assessment and access to primary performance data, appraisal records and supervisor input which are also rarely fully captured in secondary sources. Because organizational culture and informal institutional cues are similarly absent from most written records, AI systems that rely on document synthesis are structurally better positioned for organizational level analysis than for the field level, person centered stages of the Goldstein and Ford model.

The theoretical foundation of this research is based on the Training Need Evaluation Process Model developed by Goldstein and Ford (2002). This model comprises five stages including organizational analysis, requirement analysis, task and KSA analysis, person analysis, and design and evaluation input. Organizational analysis refers to assessing organizational goals, resources, climate, and constraints. Requirement analysis involves defining target jobs and boundaries, while task and KSA analysis focus on identifying tasks and determining the necessary knowledge, skills and abilities for each task. Person analysis identifies trainees and their needs, and the final stage of design and evaluation input reviews existing programs and aligns selection with training. In this study, this model served as the baseline in designing instruments for measuring the quality of TNAs.

The Goldstein and Ford (2002) framework was selected for four reasons. It is theoretically foundational, representing the most widely cited refinement of McGehee and Thayer's (1961) three-level organization-task-person (O-T-P) model for over six decades. It is comprehensive yet diagnostic, enabling level-specific comparison between AI-generated and expert-generated reports rather than a single aggregate score, which aligns with the study's findings. It is evaluative rather than descriptive, treating needs assessment as the foundational input to training design and evaluation, which aligns directly with the study's objective of comparing final TNA report quality. Lastly, it offers institutional fit, as it is the framework already embedded in the TNA practice of the Nepal Administrative Staff College (NASC), which ensure that evaluation criteria were meaningful to practitioners and consistent with the institution's own standards.

Prompt Engineering for AI-Based TNA

Generative AI refers to systems capable of producing new text, images or other content. LLMs are a class of generative AI trained on very large volumes of text to identify statistical

patterns between words and tokens. When an input is given to LLM, it predicts and generates the most statistically plausible continuation rather than retrieving a stored answer or reasoning independently about the request (Suleyman & Bhaskar, 2025; Tegmark, 2017). NotebookLM and Claude, introduced below, are both LLM based tools used in this study strictly as decision support instruments for drafting and structuring the AI-generated TNA report.

In this study, the prompt for generating the AI-supported TNA report was engineered following established best practices. Google's Gemini prompting guidebook (2024) has simplified effective prompt design around four core elements: persona, task, context, and format. We followed these practices by assigning a clear expert role, providing detailed contextual framing specific to Sudurpaschim Province, using structured instructions with delimiters, specifying output format matching NASC's TNA templates, emphasizing evidence-based claims with source disclosure, and incorporating safeguards against hallucination. The prompt was further refined through iterative testing and expert feedback from different IT professionals. In this study, two tools were combined for a specific reason. NotebookLM was used first because it is source-grounded by design, restricting its output to the documents and links it is given, which significantly reduces hallucination. A comparative evaluation of ChatGPT, Gemini and NotebookLM on a 300-page reporting task found hallucination rates of roughly 40 percent for ChatGPT and Gemini compared with only 13 percent for NotebookLM (Hagar et al., 2025). However, NotebookLM's source grounded output was comparatively concise and lacked the analytical depth required for a full TNA report. Its output was therefore used as structured input for Claude. Claude is a model recognized for stronger reasoning, more coding-like structured output, effective handling of long context inputs and a comparatively lower tendency toward hallucination (Anthropic,2025).

Therefore, making it better suited to producing a detailed, traceable final report. NotebookLM thus provided grounded raw synthesis, while Claude provided the structuring and analytical elaboration. The final refined prompt was applied across multiple AI models: NotebookLM was used initially due to its tendency to remain strictly within provided sources; this output was then fed into Claude Opus 4.7 for more detailed, structured analysis. This was substantiated by a study that found NotebookLM produced hallucinations in 13 percent of outputs compared to approximately 40 percent for ChatGPT and Gemini (Hagar et al., 2025).The complete engineered prompt, including its data handling and traceability rules, is provided in Appendix A for reproducibility.

Stakeholder Acceptability: ISTAM Framework.

Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) reasons that acceptance is influenced by perceived usefulness and ease of use, which then influence attitudes and intention to use (Davis, 1989). Unlike conventional IT technologies, AI systems tend to generate complicated

and ambiguous output, raising "black box" concerns. Vorm & Combs (2022) proposed the Intelligent Systems Technology Acceptance Model (ISTAM) which is an extension of TAM by incorporating transparency and trust. According to ISTAM, transparency increases perceptions of ease of use and usefulness and trust, which in turn strengthens acceptance. The five constructs for assessing stakeholder acceptability in this study were: perceived ease of use, transparency, trust, perceived usefulness, and behavioral intention.

In public institutions specifically, acceptability depends not only on usefulness and trust but also on legitimacy and governance expectations. Perceived legitimacy is threatened when algorithmic systems weaken participation, procedural fairness, transparency, accountability and equity of outcomes (Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2022). The perceived fairness, accountability and transparency are strongly linked to trust and adoption of algorithmic services more broadly (Shin & Park, 2019).

Despite growing global interest in applying AI in Human Resource Management and TNA, several important research gaps persist. No study has yet compared the quality of AI-generated TNA reports with expert-prepared reports within Nepal's public sector. There is limited empirical evidence on stakeholder acceptance of AI-generated TNA recommendations. Although AI has been applied in skill-gap analysis globally, its effectiveness in resource-constrained public institutions remains largely unexplored. The theoretical limitations discussed above show AI's pattern based rather than reasoning-based operation, and its structural weakness in eliciting tacit knowledge gap. This study later reports in task/KSA and person analysis, suggesting the gap is not incidental, but a predictable consequence of how these systems process information. Finally, little guidance exists on how AI can be meaningfully integrated into existing TNA workflows without diminishing the contextual judgment that human experts provide. This study addresses these gaps through a systematic comparative analysis grounded in Nepal's emerging policy context.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study positions the TNA as the independent variable (traditional expert-driven approach or the AI-driven approach) on the same organizational datasets. The dependent variables are quality, time and cost for comparing two approaches. Firstly, the quality of TNA is assessed in relation to the Goldstein and Ford model of Training Need Evaluation process that consists of organizational analysis, requirement analysis, task and KSA analysis, person analysis and input design and evaluation of training. Secondly, efficiency is assessed by the time (in hours) and cost (in NPR) taken to complete each approach. Both reports are scored and results are compared. The evaluative variable is stakeholder acceptability specific to AI condition only. It assesses the willingness of managers and employees to endorse, rely on and implement AI-generated TNA. This is measured through perceived usefulness, ease of use, transparency and behavioral intention drawing on TAM, UTAUT and ISTAM frameworks (Davis, 1989; Venkatesh et al., 2003; Vorm & Combs, 2022).

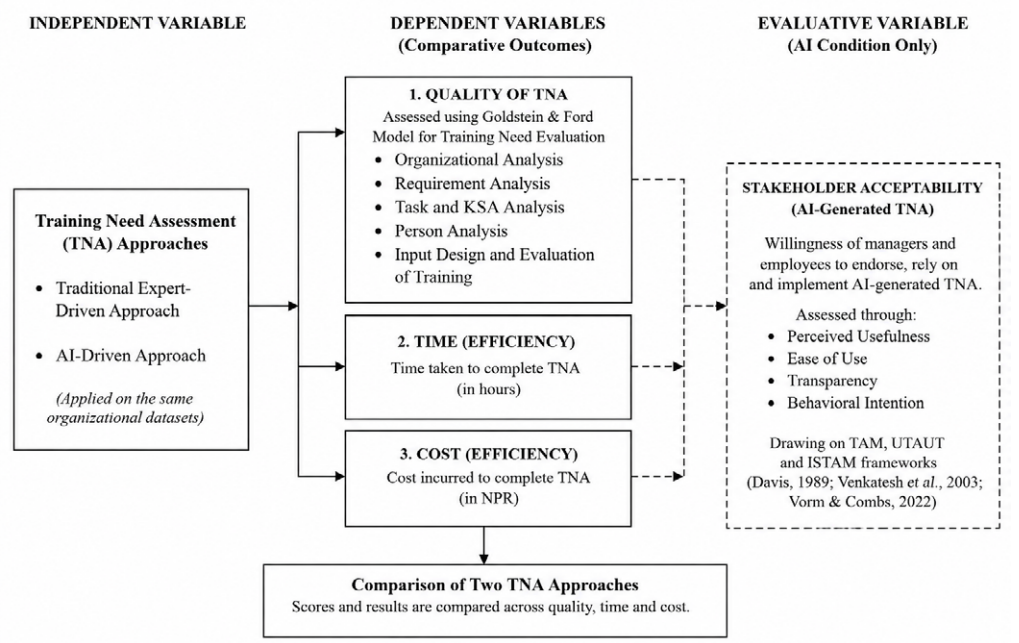

Figure 1: Conceptual framework of the study

Methods

The study follows a mixed-method design. Specifically, the study adopts a convergent parallel mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), in which quantitative and qualitative responses were collected simultaneously, analysed independently, and merged at the interpretation stage. The rationale for combining both approaches is methodological triangulation (Denzin, 1978; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018): A purely quantitative comparison of scores would have reported that the expert report scored higher in task/KSA analysis without explaining the substantive reasons stakeholders gave for that gap; a purely qualitative account would have captured those reasons but could not have established the magnitude of the time (50.71%) and cost (74.34%) savings or the reliability of the measurement instruments. By merging both, the study achieves breadth and depth. The quantitative strand establishes the size and direction of differences, while the qualitative strand contextualizes and explains them, with points of convergence between the two approaches strengthening the overall confidence in the findings (for example, efficiency emerging as the dominant theme in both ISTAM scores and interview comments).

Since NASC conducted various expert-driven TNAs, a comprehensive TNA report with access to raw data served as the baseline. The same dataset including the format and layout were then used to generate the AI-assisted TNA. By keeping the dataset constant, the research design ensures that differences in outcomes can be attributed primarily to the

method of analysis (expert vs. AI) rather than variations in data sources. Both reports were then evaluated for quality using the same blind rated instrument, and the AI report alone was additionally assessed for stakeholder acceptability.

Population, Sample, and Participants

The population of this study includes all TNAs that NASC completed during the two fiscal years 2080/81 and 2081/82 for various government institutions in Nepal. From this population, the TNA report of Sudurpaschim Province prepared by the experts was purposely selected as a sample, where a thorough expert-driven TNA had been done. Additionally, the report was comprehensive and had access to raw data for further analysis. The participants of expert TNA involved 46 government officials holding positions above 7th levels taken from different ministries of Sudurpashchim Province. To assess the quality of both the expert-driven and AI-generated reports, a panel of independent evaluators, including stakeholders and academics, was formed. Three external evaluators provided unbiased assessments of both reports. Additionally, 15 participants from various provincial ministries reviewed the overall quality of the two reports, while 17 stakeholders evaluated the acceptability of the AI-generated report.

Data Collection Methods

The study employed two main data collection methods. First, secondary data collection was carried out through the existing expert-driven TNA reports prepared by NASC and the underlying raw data. These documents served as input for generating the AI-driven TNA. Second, primary data for comparing report qUality was collected through a structured workshop-based approach. Reports were anonymized and labeled as Report A and Report B. Participants were given materials two to three days prior to the workshop for thorough review and were then briefed on evaluation criteria. They were divided into groups of two members each for structured discussion and evaluation. For assessing acceptability of the AI-generated report, stakeholders were approached individually, briefed on study objectives, given the AI report, and asked to evaluate using a structured sheet within two to three days.

Instruments

The main research tool was the TNA Evaluation Scoring Sheet, which was based on Goldstein and Ford's Model of Training Need Evaluation Process and comprised five essential dimensions: organizational analysis, requirement analysis, task and KSA analysis, person analysis, and design and evaluation input. A 5-point rating system was used for each dimension, with 1 denoting "strongly disagree" and 5 denoting "strongly agree." The study used Vorm and Combs's ISTAM tool, which measures perceived ease of use, transparency, trust, perceived utility, and behavioral intention on a 5-point scale, to assess stakeholder acceptability of the AI-generated TNA. Additionally, brief feedback surveys and semi-structured interviews were employed to record qualitative remarks. Three NASC faculty with TNA expertise participated in a pilot test to improve the assessment framework and questionnaire.

Data Analysis

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used in the study. In quantitative analysis, time and cost data were presented descriptively in percentages and the average scores provided for the reports were compared. Descriptive statistics like means and percentages were used to examine survey results. Qualitative data from interviews was analyzed thematically to compare quality and capture stakeholder acceptability. When comparing AI and expert-driven TNA, this mixed-methods approach offers quantifiable and interpretive insights.

Data Validity and Reliability

Content validity was established by designing the instrument in consultation with TNA NASC experts. Furthermore, the prompt for generating the AI TNA went through several rounds of interactions and was finalized in consultation with three IT professionals consisting of a software engineer with six years of experience in the field of AI, a NASC IT specialist and an IT professional, ensuring content validity. In addition, internal validity was strengthened by applying the same dataset for both TNAs and through blind evaluation by three independent raters using the same NASC report template. Reports were anonymized and labeled only as Report A and Report B with randomized order, ensuring evaluators remained blind to report type. Because each report can differ in tone or phrasing, both reports were also reformatted into the identical NASC report template and section structure before evaluation, so that formatting and stylistic cues could not signal report origin to the raters.

The Cronbach's alpha for Expert TNA, across all 25 TNA quality items, is 0.91, indicating that respondents answered consistently across all the questions. Compared to Expert TNA, AI-generated TNA scores slightly higher with the reliability score of 0.95, showing stronger construct-level reliability. Similarly, for the acceptability assessment, Cronbach's alpha of 0.87 indicates good internal consistency. This shows that respondents answered the acceptability items in a coherent and consistent manner, reflecting a reliable measurement of constructs. Thus, the findings can be considered methodologically credible and trustworthy. Because a Cronbach’s alpha this high can also reflect item redundancy or overlap between related constructs rather than only true reliability. It is recommended that future studies apply confirmatory factor analysis and assess discriminant validity before drawing casual conclusions from similarly high internal consistency values. Regarding ethics, all personal identifiers were removed from datasets before AI processing, data was used strictly for research purposes, and informed consent was sought from relevant departments, employees and experts. Also, AI-assisted tools were used for language refinement.

Ethical Consideration

Regarding ethics, all personal identifiers were removed from datasets before AI processing, data was used strictly for research purposes, and informed consent was sought from relevant departments, employees and experts. Also, AI-assisted tools were used for language refinement.

Results and Discussion

Time and Cost Efficiency

The expert TNA required 41 working days (984 hours), incurring a total expenditure of NPR 787,692 for the service fee, transportation, and allowance for four people. In contrast, the AI-enabled TNA process was done in only 20 days and 5 hours (485 hours), with an associated total expenditure of NPR 202,087. This includes the cost of subscribing to the AI system and travel for fieldwork. Using the AI-enabled TNA would be 50.71 percent quicker and 74.34 percent cheaper, calculated as:

$$\textit{Time Saved} = (984 - 485) / 984 \times 100 = 50.71\%$$

$$\textit{Cost Saved} = (787{,}692 - 202{,}087) / 787{,}692 \times 100 = 74.34\%$$

Table 1: TNA Cost and Time Comparison — Expert and AI-Based

Item	Expert TNA	AI-Based TNA
Time Breakdown		
Questionnaire / Prompt design	10 days	10 days
Data collection / Data preparationvw	14 days (7 field + 7 tablework)	5 days
Data cleaning / Data feeding	7 days	5 hours
AI generation time	—	3 days
Analysis, report writing / Editing & refinement	10 days	2 days
Total days	41 days	20 days + 5 hrs
Total hours	984 hrs	485 hrs (↓ 50.71%)
Days allocated (as per proposed plan)	67.5 days	—
Cost Breakdown (NPR)		
Professional Fee		
Professional fee calculation	67.5/120 × 1,051,600	—
Professional fee total (NPR)	591,525	—
AI Subscription (AI-Based TNA only)		
Claude + GPT subscriptions ($40 × 148)	—	5,920
Travel & Logistics (4 team members)		
Transport (NPR)	137,667	137,667
Daily allowance (NPR)	58,500	58,500
TOTAL COST (NPR)	787,692	202,087 (↓ 74.34%)

Quality Comparison: Goldstein and Ford Training Need Evaluation Model

The total score for the Expert TNA (Report A) and the AI TNA (Report B) were 74 percent and 67 percent, respectively, representing a quality gap of 7 percent. Across Goldstein and Ford's five phases of TNA analysis, the comparative scores between the two reports were: organizational analysis showed near parity (Expert: 14.53; AI: 14.00); requirement analysis had a moderate gap (19.07 vs. 16.53); task/KSA analysis had the largest gap (30.53 vs. 24.93); person analysis had a moderate difference (18.07 vs. 15.20); and finally, design and evaluation input had the closest difference (10.67 vs. 9.60).

Organizational analysis: near parity (14.53 vs. 14.00)

Goldstein and Ford position organizational analysis as the foundation of TNA, examining organizational goals, resources, climate and constraints. The near-identical scores suggest that AI's capacity to synthesize secondary sources such as strategy documents, annual reports and policy texts is functionally equivalent to expert judgment at this stage, which suggests that organizational analysis is largely a desk based, document-driven activity. However, experts can still check organizational context through informal cues and stakeholder conversations that secondary sources alone do not capture.

Requirement analysis: moderate gap (19.07 vs. 16.53)

This stage defines the target job and its boundaries the entry point into the analytical cascade. The expert's advantage here is consequential rather than merely numerical meaning if the job scope is wrongly bounded, every downstream decision about tasks and KSAs is built on a flawed foundation. AI's lower score likely reflects its inability to probe ambiguities, since it cannot ask why a role is structured a certain way or detect inconsistencies between a formal job description and actual practice, whereas experts navigate this through interviews, observation and iterative clarification.

Task and KSA analysis: largest gap (30.53 vs. 24.93*)*

This is the technical heart of the Goldstein and Ford model and the point of greatest divergence. The expert's higher score reflects an ability AI cannot easily replicate conducting structured task inventories, observing incumbent behavior, and eliciting tacit knowledge through interaction. Deriving KSAs particularly distinguishing what should be selected for versus trained requires judgement about the frequency, importance and difficulty of tasks that is difficult to extract from text alone. AI can competently map documented tasks, but it struggles with tasks that are rarely written down, contextually variable, or visible only through direct observation. This gap represents the most significant practical concern for treating AI-generated TNA as a replacement rather than a supplement to expert judgement.

Person analysis: moderate gap (18.07 vs. 15.20)

Person analysis answers Goldstein and Ford's two operational questions: who needs training, and what kind. This requires real performance data, appraisal records, supervisor

assessments and competency ratings, ideally gathered at the individual level. The expert's advantage reflects access to primary data sources and the ability to triangulate across them. AI can infer performance gaps from aggregated or publicly available information but cannot evaluate the performance of specific employees, a limitation more about data access than analytical ability, one that could narrow if an AI system were integrated with internal HR data rather than limited to external sources.

Design and evaluation input: closest gap (10.67 vs. 9.60)

This stage involves reviewing existing programs, designing evaluation frameworks, and aligning selection with training systems. Both approaches performed comparably, reviewing existing training programs, designing assessment and performance appraisal tools, and aligning selection and training systems by identifying which KSAs should be hired for versus trained. Neither scored particularly high in absolute terms, suggesting this phase may have been less thoroughly addressed by both approaches.

The findings reveal that the effectiveness of AI decreases as the model moves from the broader organizational analysis (document-driven approach) to a narrowed-down task/KSA and personal analysis (field-level/personal approach). AI is strong in secondary synthesis but weak in personal/primary observations. This reinforces Kahneman & Klein's (2009) claim that experts often take a long time, need many resources, and are exposed to evaluators' cognitive biases.In terms of practical significance, a 7 percent gap on a 25-item scoring instrument is not trivial. It is concentrated almost entirely in the two stages task/KSA and person analysis that Goldstein and Ford treat as the technical and operational core of a TNA. This means the gap is operationally meaningful in the sense that an AI-generated report can be trusted more readily for organization level framing than for the specific, actionable task and person level recommendations that ultimately drive training design. This pattern is broadly consistent with evidence from other domains. For instance, a validity study of AI-based clinical skills assessment found that AI could match trained human raters on structured, well defined rating tasks, but such parity is more attainable in narrow, clearly bounded assessments than in the open-ended, context dependent judgments required at the task/KSA and person levels of TNA (Johnsson et al., 2023).

Qualitative Analysis for Comparing TNA Quality

Based on study participants' feedback, the Expert TNA appeared to be descriptive and comprehensive. It conducted a holistic assessment of the situation by addressing the gaps in knowledge, skills, attitude, as well as behavioral aspects including the presence of "hakim" mentality. Moreover, this approach was specific enough to identify the differences between the entry-level and in-service officials. Majority of participants perceived it as objective, practical, and representative of the province-specific context. Nevertheless, the participants raised concerns on the absence of monitoring and evaluation mechanism, coverage of multiple levels of government, poor link between the training needs and performance, limited sample size (46 participants out of 88 local governments and 9 districts), potential

social desirability bias from self-assessment, as well as the underrepresentation of induction training for 8th level officials.

The AI-generated TNA was considered concise and well-structured, showing the use of triangulation consisting of direct evidence, secondary sources, and inference. The TNA showed an effective connection between training practices at both national and international levels with SPARTA. It also shows that its analysis was in line with the pertinent constitutional and legislative acts. One of the key strengths of the AI-TNA was its clarity and prioritization framework based on frequency, severity, strategic significance, and feasibility. However, the priority matrix assigned equal weight to all four parameters without any explanation. Besides this, the TNA did not have the wider contextual outlook of the expert-generated report and relied heavily on documentation over first-hand sources such as quantitative standards, competencies and performance indicators.

Overall, out of 15 study respondents, 8 preferred the Expert TNA, 5 remained neutral, and only 2 preferred the AI-generated TNA. Those preferring the expert report found it more practically relevant and implementable due to its practical grounding. Supporters of the AI report appreciated its clarity, simplicity, and structured presentation.

Stakeholder Acceptability: ISTAM Results The average overall score for AI-based TNA acceptability was 66.57 out of 100, indicating moderate and conditional acceptance. Across the four ISTAM constructs, usefulness scored highest (mean 3.62), followed by behavioral intention (mean 3.33), transparency (mean 3.26), and ease of use (mean 3.09).

Usefulness was driven primarily by efficiency: time saving scored 4.00 and effort saving scored 3.71, both the highest items in the entire study. However, items related to AI decision quality (3.35) and accurate identification of training needs (3.41) remained only moderate, suggesting stakeholders primarily value efficiency gains rather than fully trusting the quality of AI-generated findings.

Behavioral intention reflected cautious and consistent support across all three items (intent to support = 3.35, accept as input = 3.29, willingness to recommend = 3.35). Transparency revealed a critical explainability gap: stakeholders could verify outputs (3.41) but could not clearly see the reasoning process behind them (3.12) or whether limitations were adequately disclosed (3.24). For instance, in the quality comparison, the AI-generated TNA's prioritization matrix, that ranked training needs based on four key factors: frequency, feasibility, severity, and strategic importance, was highly appreciated by the evaluators for its structured and systematic presentation. However, concerns emerged regarding the transparency of the prioritization process, as all four factors appeared to be assigned equal weight without any clear explanation, rationale, or underlying logic. This lack of clarity created "black box" concerns among stakeholders, making it difficult for them to understand how the final prioritization scores were generated. As a result, issues related to trust,

interpretability, and stakeholder acceptance were raised, despite the perceived usefulness of the matrix itself.

Ease of use was the most concerning construct (mean 3.09). Within it, the item measuring whether the AI-supported TNA fits into the workflow without extra effort or support scored just 2.41, the only item in the entire survey to fall below the 3.0 midpoint signaling active disagreement rather than mere neutrality. Because stakeholders could still use and interpret the AI outputs reasonably well (use = 3.29, interpret = 3.47), the low score is better read as a friction point about embedding AI outputs into existing institutional systems than as a rejection of the outputs themselves. Similarly, a related item on whether recommendations fit the organization's policy and systems scored a modest 3.18. This pattern points less to a technological limitation of the AI tools than to organizational readiness, institutional processes, reporting formats and decision-making systems. The study is consistent with public servants' documented concerns about infrastructure readiness and digital literacy elsewhere in Nepal (Mahat, 2024) The strategic implications are that human judgment is increasingly necessary, particularly when organizations grow more complex with AI adoption (Goldfarb & Lindsay, 2022).

Qualitatively, stakeholders accepted AI-based TNA primarily for its time-saving capability, efficiency, and data-driven analysis. Main reasons for non-acceptance included concerns of trust in AI, that its policies and processes lack clarity, that recommendations appear generic, and that AI fails to capture regional differences such as geographical, social, cultural, economic, and legal variations.

Interpreting the Quality Gap

The 7 percent quality gap (74% vs. 67%) indicates that the participants favored expert TNA more than AI TNA. This conclusion emphasizes Wilson and Daugherty's (2018) assertion that even though AI typically has an upper hand in recognizing patterns and predicting future outcomes, it falls behind humans when it comes to contextual analysis and ethical decision-making. Likewise, the near parity scores in organizational analysis is consistent with a review on Flevy by Robinson (n.d), which depicts AI performing well on document-driven, desk-based tasks. Likewise, the considerable gap observed in task and KSA analysis, which Goldstein and Ford (2002) consider as the technical heart of TNA, reveals that AI cannot understand structured task inventories, behavior, and tacit knowledge from text alone.

Harari's (2024) philosophical caution about "alien intelligence" is especially relevant in this context. AI may produce convincing results without genuine understanding of underlying processes involved, thereby creating what Duncan (2026) terms as "workslop". The report generated by AI may look well-crafted, however, is devoid of substance and context required for decision-making. Substantiating this, the study implies that expert-generated TNA was able to recognize the attitudinal and behavioral factors, like the "hakim mentality,"

illustrating contextual understanding can only be achieved through human analysis, which AI cannot analyze simply based on documents and website access.

Efficiency Gains and Their Implications

The 50.71 percent time and 74.34 percent cost savings in AI-generated TNA represents substantial efficiency gains which uphold Yan et al.'s (2024) assertion of AI's potential to enhance learning through personalized assistance, quick feedback, and novel assessment techniques. Considering Nepal's resource-strained public sector, such gains have a notable impact on the organizations that are limited in budget and time frames. These results align well with Maity (2019), signifying AI overcoming lengthy and tiresome TNA procedures. However, cost reductions should be considered along with quality results, as lower cost does not mean much unless the produced TNA gives clear recommendations. The stakeholders' moderate quality trust (M = 3.35 for decision quality) suggests that efficiency gains are recognized but do not necessarily translate into confidence in AI-generated findings.

Stakeholder Acceptability and the ISTAM Framework

The ISTAM findings show a pattern consistent with the framework's notion. Usefulness, specifically efficiency gains, is the primary driver of acceptance. Yet the transparency gap where outputs can be seen but the reasoning process behind them cannot be fully understood represents the classic explainability problem identified by Vorm and Combs (2022). The stakeholders could verify what the AI produced (M = 3.41) but remained uncertain about how and why it was produced, since the weakest transparency items concerned the availability of information to review the process (M = 3.12) and the disclosure of limitations (M = 3.24). This is not merely a technical shortfall but a matter of trust. Without visibility into the reasoning path, stakeholders cannot independently judge whether a recommendation follows sound logic or reflects an unexamined assumption, which is precisely the concern that surfaced around the equally weighted prioritization matrix. According to Grimmelikhuijsen et al. (2022), legitimacy of algorithms as tools of decision-making is compromised when systems reduce participation, procedural fairness, and accountability just like stakeholders from Sudurpaschim Province have emphasized. Related evidence on algorithmic services more broadly finds that perceived fairness, accountability and transparency are closely linked to trust and to willingness to adopt algorithmic tools (Shin & Park, 2019). Workflow integration emerged as the most important factor (M = 2.41) amongst the aspects of acceptability. This denotes that the issue is not whether the stakeholder considers AI useful per se, but whether AI output fits within established organizational workflows such as institutional processes, reporting formats and decision-making systems.Digital literacy and institutional readiness compound this challenge. The provincial level public servants elsewhere in Nepal have expressed similar concerns about infrastructure readiness and digital literacy when adopting AI tools (Mahat, 2024), and NASC's own established reporting practices and templates were not originally designed to accommodate AI-generated input, which likely contributes to the friction stakeholders reported. In that regard, it augments the results presented by Neumann

et al. (2024) about the role of organizational readiness, resources, skills, and governance arrangements.

A high internal consistency values (Cronbach's Alpha) observed in this study, while indicative of strong reliability, may also reflect potential item redundancy or multicollinearity among related constructs. Future researchers are cautioned to conduct confirmatory factor analysis and assess discriminant validity indices (e.g., Average Variance Extracted) to rule out multicollinearity before drawing causal inferences from similar measurement models.

Beyond acceptability, the use of AI to support public-sector decision-making raises broader questions of governance, accountability and ethics that extend past the individual stakeholder's trust. Because algorithmic legitimacy in government depends on preserving participation, procedural fairness, accountability and equitable outcomes (Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2022; Shin & Park, 2019), institutions adopting AI-supported TNA should treat explainability as governance requirements. Every AI-generated recommendation that feeds into a training or budgetary decision should be traceable and subject to accountable human review, consistent with this study's finding that stakeholders accept AI output more readily when they trust the process that produced it.

Complementary Role of AI in TNA

The triangulation of quantitative ratings and qualitative comments shows a clear pattern suggesting a blended approach. An expert-based TNA brings the analytical rigor associated with primary research findings. The AI-based TNA, on the other hand, provides better policy alignment and justifications for addressing governments where policy alignment entails institutional weight. According to the Hybrid Intelligence Framework proposed by Dellermann et al. (2019), a combination of AI and human judgment leads to better results as opposed to either approach independently.This is consistent with related human-in-the-loop evidence from clinical skills assessment, where AI-based scoring showed strong agreement with trained human raters on structured tasks but performed best when paired with, rather than substituted for, expert judgement (Johnsson et al., 2023). A pattern this study's own findings reproduce at the organizational level (where AI performs comparably to experts) versus the task/KSA and person levels where expert judgement remains distinctly stronger.

Delimitations of the Study

The delimiting factors of the research are also crucial to address. The raw data used for the AI analysis was first noted in diaries by the expert team. This data had certain nuances that could only be interpreted through firsthand field experience. Likewise, comparisons drawn were limited to selected chapters of the expert's report. Also, prompt engineering required significant intervention and skill, translating to results not easily replicable without comparable competence and guidance. These factors highlight why an AI-only technique remains inadequate.

Conclusion and Implications

The comparison between expert and AI-based TNA of Sudurpaschim Province is a novel study in Nepal's public sector context. The key findings of this study are that expert TNA outperforms AI-generated TNA in terms of overall quality (74% compared to 67%), particularly in the stages of task/KSA and person analysis. However, AI achieves near parity scores in document-driven organizational analysis while saving 50.71 percent in time and 74.34 percent in cost compared to expert-led TNA. The score of 66.57 out of 100 implies moderate and conditional acceptance of TNA generated by AI. The findings reveal that usefulness driven by efficiency in time and cost are the strongest drivers for accepting AI-generated TNA. However, the lowest mean score of 2.41 in integrating AI into the workflow remains the greatest challenge in acceptance. Likewise, the transparency reveals a critical explainability gap where stakeholders can verify output but cannot understand the reasoning behind them, indicating the importance of human judgement and contextual intelligence particularly in field-level analysis.

The study offers five evidence-based recommendations. First, AI-generated TNA should disclose the methodology used in gathering, analyzing, and interpreting the data used for the AI output. Second, a human-in-the-loop approach should be adopted as a formal design approach for TNA with expert validation as a required step. A clearer implementation framework consistent with the stage level findings above can be framed as:

- AI-supported tasks: document review, literature and policy synthesis, data organization, preliminary analysis, report drafting, formatting, and prioritizing training needs.
- Human-led tasks: field observations, interviews, task/KSA analysis, person analysis, contextual interpretation, stakeholder consultation, validation of AI outputs, and final decision-making.

Third, AI results should be localized to Sudurpaschim Province's context by using locally verified, organization-specific data aligned with the country's rules, regulations, and frameworks. Fourth, governments should plan to enhance capacity building of users to use AI as well as build clear AI policies for broader acceptance. Fifth, AI-assisted TNA is more suitable as complementary input to experts' decision-making rather than the standalone basis for determining training needs.

Since the study is based on one province of the country, a key limitation of this study is that the findings of the study cannot be generalized across Nepal's diverse public sector contexts. Similarly, the AI output was also heavily dependent on the availability and quality of raw data and on the prompt engineering skills. The findings are further bound by the specific AI models used NotebookLM for source-grounded synthesis and Claude for structured elaboration with prompt engineering expertise applied to combine them. Because LLMs are updated frequently and their hallucination and reasoning characteristics vary across models

and versions (Hagar et al., 2025), the magnitude of the quality gap and the time and cost savings reported here should be treated as specific to this model pairing and this point in time and may not hold identically for other LLMs or future model versions. Because the study is based on a single provincial case, the extent to which these findings transfer to other contexts warrants caution. Sudurpaschim Province's own sample of 46 respondents was already acknowledged as limited relative to its 88 local governments and 9 districts. The same logic likely applies across provinces and federal agencies with comparable resource constraints, dataset availability and TNA practices to Sudurpaschim Province may see similar patterns, but provinces or agencies with denser primary data, more mature digital infrastructure or different institutional workflows could see a narrower or wider quality gap and different acceptability results. Broader implementation would therefore be most appropriate where a comparable expert baseline dataset exists for validation and where institutions have already begun building the digital capability and workflow readiness this study finds lacking in Sudurpaschim Province. However, the methodology and prompting techniques could set the tone for comparable study in the future.

Further research should expand across multiple contexts, institutions and different provinces, investigate the integration of AI with real-time HR data systems, develop standardized AI governance frameworks for TNA in Nepal's public sector along with guidelines for implementation More broadly, the hybrid AI and expert approach recommended here offers a concrete mechanism for operationalizing Nepal's National AI Policy 2082 with assigning AI to document review, synthesis and drafting while reserving field level analysis and final judgement for experts. The institutions can therefore pursue the Policy's aims of efficient, ethical and transparent AI enhanced public service delivery without displacing the contextual and evidence-based human resource development that Nepal's public sector requires. In this regard, the study's contribution extends beyond TNA itself to demonstrate, empirically, one workable model for responsibly integrating AI into public-sector governance and evidence based HRD more broadly. As Nepal continues to implement its National AI Policy 2082 and advance toward a knowledge-based economy, the responsible and evidence-based integration of AI into public sector capacity building will be essential for sustainable human resource development.

Finally, future research should also investigate under what conditions a hybrid AI-expert model can close the quality gap in task/KSA and person analysis while preserving the time and cost efficiencies demonstrated in this study. Three subsequent questions follow: How can human-in-the-loop configurations be designed to compensate for AI's limitations in field-dependent analysis? How can explainability and workflow integration gaps be addressed to strengthen stakeholder trust and institutional adoption? And do the patterns observed in Sudurpaschim Province hold when replicated across other provinces, institutions, and TNA datasets? Answering these questions would shift the focus from whether AI can match expert judgement to how the two can be most effectively combined in resource-constrained public institutions.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to confidentiality, anonymity, and ethical requirements. Personal identifiers were removed from the datasets before AI processing, as described in the Methodology section.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests relevant to this article.

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Declaration of Generative AI Use

Generative AI tools were used for generating and structuring the AI-based Training Needs Assessment (TNA) report as part of the research process, and for language refinement of the manuscript. The authors reviewed, verified, and took full responsibility for the final content of the article.

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Appendix A: AI Prompting Protocol

The NASC report was divided into three sections, and each section was assigned to AI as an independent task. For each task, the AI was first provided with the corresponding section of an existing NASC report as a reference to understand its format, structure, and writing style. Specifically, Section 1- Background was used as the reference for Task 1- Section 1 specific links, resources, Section 2- Contextual Studies for Task 2- Section 2 specific links and resources, and Section 3- Analysis for Task 3-section 3 specific links and resources. Based on this understanding and the provided prompt, the AI then generated the respective section of the report. Then each generated section was compiled into one single report. This was done because when a single report was fed to AI.

Role: You are acting as a specialist in Training Need Assessment (TNA). Your task is to generate a formal TNA report for Sudurpaschim province, Nepal, from the provided resources.

Context: This report is intended for provincial government stakeholders. It must replicate the formal tone and structure of the NASC TNA report template.

Language: The entire report must be written in Formal Nepali.

Resources: Both qualitative and quantitative data collected from interviews and surveys, along with secondary data sources such as website links, books, constitutional laws and regulations, are provided for analysis (The resources here were :the format of the NASC report, Task, Links to the websites for contents, Good Governance (Management and Operation) Act, 2008 (2064 B.S.),Local Government Operation Act, 2017 (2074 B.S.), Constitution of Nepal, Quantative data provided by the experts for their TNA study. All these resources and websites links were solely based on resources that expert used for their TNA study. Besides these, no other resources were used)

Here are data handling and traceability rules that you must follow to generate Training Need Assessment report.

1. Source Fidelity: You should only the sources provided to you. Do NOT fabricate statistics, quotes, or historical facts. Do not hallucinate.
2. Data Gaps: If specific data for a table or section is missing from the uploaded sources, write: "[DATA GAP: Insufficient data available]".
3. Traceability: You must link every finding to its source. You can use the phrases to indicate that it is based on the survey results or interview respondents.

4. Reasoning: In the findings you must distinguish between Direct Evidence (e.g., a specific percentage of respondents reporting a need), Inference (e.g., what a finding suggests about an underlying gap), and Triangulation (e.g., where multiple data sources converge on the same conclusion).
5. Prioritization Logic: You must rank training needs in the report based on frequency, severity, strategic importance, and feasibility.

I have provided you the links and documents (resources), a format of TNA (file name: eg Task 1, Task 2, Task 3). Draft a TNA report based on the command, resources, and Task 1 format.

Workflow: The compiled resources were first processed in NotebookLM to produce a source-grounded synthesis, which was then used as structured input for Claude to produce the final, more detailed and traceable report, consistent with the two-stage process described in the Prompt Engineering section.

Research Article

Beyond Trainee Motivation: Exploring How Workplace Conditions Shape Training Transfer

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Abstract

While instructional training aims to improve teaching in public technical schools, newly trained instructors often face challenges applying new skills at work. Using a basic qualitative design with four newly appointed instructors in Nepal, this study explored how workplace conditions shape post-training skill use. The findings show that while relevant training builds initial motivation and confidence, personal readiness alone cannot sustain long-term teaching changes. When newly trained educators encounter rigid administrative approval bottlenecks, limited workshop tools, heavy workloads, and peer resistance from senior staff, their initial motivation gradually fades. Specifically, this study shows that training transfer operates as an interconnected process over time, in which persistent workplace barriers cause an instructor's initial enthusiasm to gradually decline into minimal compliance or an intent to resign. To support skill transfer, technical school leadership can apply practical strategies such as combining regular feedback from supervisors with efficient approval procedures for necessary resources, alongside setting up formal teacher networks to support collaborative practice. By showing how supervisor support, administrative rules, and colleague relationships together shape skill use over time, this study emphasizes the importance of supportive workplace conditions following training.

Keywords: training transfer; instructor motivation; workplace conditions; supervisor support; TVET

Introduction

Training is widely recognized as an essential element of human resource development designed to enhance employee performance. In addition, training and development is strongly linked to organizational performance (Kraiger et al., 2004). Considering that an organization's competitive advantages rely on its workforce, organizations spend substantial amount on training programs to increase their productivity (Knyphausen-Aufseß et al., 2009). However, training is only considered successful when the acquired knowledge, skills and attitudes are transferred back to the job place, a process commonly termed training

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transfer (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Blume, et al., 2010). Poor training transfer is therefore not a minor implementation issue but a fundamental challenge that undermines the value of the training investment itself (Burke & Hutchins, 2007). When instructors return from training programs, their ability to apply new competencies is heavily influenced by the physical, temporal, and social conditions of their work environment (Blume et al., 2010).

The issue of training transfer is particularly pertinent in skills-based instruction within technical education under the sector of technical vocational education and training (TVET), where instructors are expected to transition from teacher-centred routines toward interactive, student-centred methods (Runhaar, 2017). In this regard, a persistent gap remains between what educators learn in training and what they subsequently apply in their classrooms and workshops (Hughes et al., 2019). While prior literature broadly acknowledges that workplace conditions influence transfer, existing research relies predominantly on quantitative models that treat support as a static predictor. Consequently, less is known about the qualitative processes through which administrative hurdles, heavy workloads, and resource constraints interact to constrain early-career instructors. In Nepal, public technical institutions operate within centralized administrative systems with strict schedules and resource limits, making post-training skill application uniquely challenging for returning educators (Bhurtel & Bhattarai, 2023a; Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology [MoEST], 2022). Critically, these structural TVET challenges are compounded when instructional staff fail to transfer newly acquired skills to the classroom, turning diminishing training transfer into a major threat to educational quality and instructor performance.

To address this analytical gap, this study explores how the workplace environment affects how public technical instructors in Nepal use their training on the job. Specifically, this paper looks at how an instructor's own readiness, support from supervisors, administrative approval processes, and encouragement from peers work together in practical workshop settings. By analysing these workplace conditions through a qualitative inquiry, this study seeks to provide a contextualized understanding of how institutional environments shape post-training skill application in technical education.

Literature Review

Theoretical Foundations of Training Transfer

Though early research assumed training transfer to be an expected outcome of learning, subsequent studies demonstrated that learning is a necessary but not sufficient condition for transfer, as a substantial share of learning acquired in training declines soon after trainees return to work (Blume et al., 2010; Colquitt et al., 2000). Baldwin and Ford (1988) organized the determinants of transfer into trainee characteristics, training design, and the work environment. While training design shapes initial skill acquisition, it is primarily the workplace environment that determines whether acquired competencies are sustained or discarded over time (Grossman & Salas, 2011).

To explain the psychological mechanisms behind training application, this study draws on self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017). This theory conceptualizes motivation along a continuum ranging from autonomous to controlled regulation. Implementing student-centred teaching requires substantial voluntary effort, where autonomously motivated instructors align these methods with their professional identity and persist through challenges. In contrast, instructors with controlled motivation respond primarily to administrative monitoring or compliance rules, often reverting to traditional teaching once external pressure is removed (Gegenfurtner & Quesada-Pallarès, 2022).

Crucially, self-determination theory posits that these motivational states are not static personal traits; rather, they are directly shaped by whether the organizational environment fulfils or obstructs an individual's fundamental psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Gagné & Deci, 2005). In public technical education, rigid administrative steps restrict instructor autonomy, resource deficits impair felt competence during practical instruction, and unsupportive peer norms undermine relatedness. Self-determination theory thus illuminates how environmental constraints systematically shift instructor motivation from autonomous commitment toward controlled compliance or turnover intent.

Individual Readiness: Self-Efficacy, Motivation, and Experience

Individual attributes such as affectivity, self-efficacy, and conscientiousness shape motivation to learn and, in turn, intentions to transfer (Chiaburu & Marinova, 2005; Machin & Fogarty, 2004; Velada et al., 2007). At the individual level, self-efficacy, an individual's belief in their capability to execute a specific course of action, is a well-established predictor of learning as well as transfer behaviour (Bandura, 1997; Zimmerman, 2000). Instructors with higher self-efficacy are generally more willing to attempt interactive methods and more resilient when early attempts encounter challenges. Instructors with high self-efficacy demonstrate stronger motivation to transfer, which in turn supports skill application (Gegenfurtner et al., 2009; Tziner et al., 2007). In technical instruction, instructors who expect that applying new methods will be recognized are more likely to persist with them. Instructors who internalize the pedagogical value of active learning exhibit greater motivation to transfer. However, differences persist in learning and training transfer across career stages. Research (e.g. Bhurtel & Bhattarai, 2023b) shows higher training transfer among the instructors with relatively higher (5 to 10 years) experiences compared to newly appointed instructors. Greater workplace experience often reflects a stronger commitment to their roles, which in turn makes instructors more dedicated to applying training and performing better in classrooms (Konya et al., 2016).

Despite trainee characteristics being highlighted in relevant studies (e.g. Rahman & Bockarie, 2023), evidence confirms that these individual attributes do not operate independently of the environment. While a substantial body of research reports a positive relationship between

self-efficacy, transfer motivation, and transfer process (Blume et al., 2010; Colquitt et al., 2000), other studies show that strong individual motivation alone does not guarantee transfer, directing focus toward workplace conditions (Bhatti et al., 2013; Massenberg et al., 2017). Trainees participating in training programs with confidence and motivation frequently experience a marked decline in actual skill application once they return to institutions that do not reinforce new practices, indicating that favourable individual attributes are readily suppressed by workplace constraints (Pham et al., 2013).

Organizational Support and Supervisory Roles

Organizational support sets the overall climate within which transfer occurs, signalling to employees whether skill application is valued by institutional leadership (Rouiller & Goldstein, 1993). Within this climate, direct supervisory support functions as the operational link between training participation and workplace application (Cromwell & Kolb, 2004; Martin, 2010). Supervisors shape transfer through pre-training goal alignment, post-training feedback, and the removal of practical barriers to using new skills (Nijman et al., 2006). When new instructors receive regular pedagogical feedback and classroom observation, their belief that applying new skills will lead to meaningful professional recognition is correspondingly strengthened.

Despite the widely recognized role of supervisory support in the transfer process, empirical findings remain mixed rather than settled. Some studies report a clear positive relationship (Blume et al., 2010), while others find weak or non-significant direct effects (Chiaburu & Marinova, 2005). In higher education institutions, supervisory roles are broadly categorized into analytic, interactional, and leadership functions (Menefee, 2004). Yet, supervisory engagement with instructional staff is frequently limited to administrative auditing, attendance checks, syllabus tracking, and paperwork review, rather than instructional coaching. When supervisory attention is confined to administrative compliance, instructors learn that procedural adherence is valued over pedagogical quality, making them more likely to focus on administrative compliance rather than applying their training.

Workplace Constraints and Practical Barriers to Application

Workplace constraints are situational conditions that limit performance regardless of an employee's motivation or capability (Peters & O'Connor, 1980). In skills-based instruction specifically, delivering practical, hands-on learning depends on functioning equipment, adequate consumable materials, and manageable class sizes. When these conditions are inadequate, instructors have few opportunities to apply interactive teaching methods, regardless of their initial motivation (Jackson et al., 2019). Resource shortages, curriculum mismatches, and persistent administrative delays compel instructors to revert to convenient, traditional methods and basic compliance rather than using what they learned in training (Bhurtel & Bhattarai, 2023a). Consequently, these workplace conditions largely determine whether newly acquired skills are sustained at all (Hughes et al., 2019).

Research Gap

Extant literature indicates that training transfer among instructors is shaped by both individual readiness and external workplace conditions. Without supportive environmental factors and supervisor reinforcement, trainees are often prevented from applying newly acquired skills, ultimately returning to routine practices (Pham et al., 2013). However, empirical findings on the influence of supervisory support remain inconclusive (Blume et al., 2010; van der Klink et al., 2001), and less attention has been paid to how workplace conditions and individual attributes combine to shape transfer in daily practice. This transfer gap is particularly evident among new instructors entering the technical teaching workforce, who possess different professional attributes than experienced staff (Konya et al., 2016). In public technical institutions within developing country contexts like Nepal, these instructors must adapt to unfamiliar organizational environments while establishing their professional identity and career commitments (Bhurtel & Bhattarai, 2023b). This study addresses these gaps by exploring how new instructors experience applying their training in the workplace.

By integrating Self-Determination Theory (SDT) with Baldwin and Ford's environmental framework, this study conceptualizes training transfer not as a static outcome, but as a dynamic process where workplace constraints can systematically affect an instructor's autonomous motivation and self-efficacy. Exploring these everyday experiences requires a qualitative approach capable of capturing how early-career instructors make sense of institutional barriers following their training.

Research Method

Research Design

This study adopted a basic qualitative research design to explore participants' experiences within their professional settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Rather than treating individual schools or instructors as separate bounded cases, data were analysed collectively across all participants to examine shared operational challenges and classroom realities. This approach is particularly suited to understanding how instructors interpret their work environments and make sense of their daily teaching practices. Further, comparing accounts across different school environments helped highlight common workplace barriers alongside specific differences in how instructors delivered their lessons.

Study Area

The study was carried out in public technical schools that offer diploma and certificate level courses within Nepal's national technical and vocational education and training system. Four schools were selected from four provinces: Bagmati, Lumbini, Karnali, and Gandaki to include a range of urban, semi-rural, and rural locations, since the conditions instructors work under can differ sharply between a well-resourced urban school and a small rural one.

Participants

Participants were selected purposively based on specific inclusion criteria: holding a temporary contract as a public technical school instructor, having less than one year of teaching experience, and having completed at least the first module of instructional skills training. Instructors on permanent appointments or with over one year of experience were excluded to focus strictly on early post-training transfer challenges. Four instructors met these criteria across mechanical engineering, agriculture, and hospitality trades. In reflexive thematic analysis, sample adequacy has been evaluated relative to study depth rather than fixed formulas (Braun & Clarke, 2019b). Table 1 provides an overview of participant profiles.

Table 1: Participant Overview

Pseudonym	Gender	Province	Locale	Teaching area	Experience	Training taken
Bishesh	Male	Bagmati province	Urban	Mechanical trade, mixed theory and practical classes	About six months	Instructional skills 1 and 2
Darshan	Male	Lumbini Province	Urban	Mechanical and electrical trade with machine-based practical work	Under one year	Instructional skills-1
Barsha	Female	Karnali Province	Rural	Agriculture-based trade (horticulture, floriculture, and related subjects)	Under one year	Instructional skills-1
Rajan	Male	Gandaki Province	Rural	Hotel management	Under one year	Instructional skills 1 and 2

All names are pseudonyms. Institution names are not reported, and identifying details have been generalized, for the reasons set out under ethical considerations below.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through face-to-face, unstructured interviews at participant's respective schools or nearby locations as per their comfort. Because all participants shared identical employment status and initial training backgrounds, these detailed conversations focused closely on the shared operational environment. The depth of these extended individual sessions ensured that the interviews yielded comprehensive accounts of the core institutional barriers. Unstructured interviews allowed participants to detail their operational experiences freely, while unexpected points were pursued flexibly (Mason, 2002). On an average, interviews lasted 75 minutes, in which all interview time exceeded at least one

hour. Interviews were conducted in Nepali, audio-recorded with consent, and translated into English alongside reflexive field notes capturing non-verbal signals carry meaning beyond spoken words (Mason, 2002).

Data Analysis and Reflexivity

Data were analysed manually using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019a) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis framework: familiarization, generating initial codes, searching for candidate themes, reviewing themes, defining final themes, and writing the report. Codes were built inductively from translated transcripts and cross-checked against original Nepali recordings. As qualitative researchers with familiarity in training systems and technical education systems, we maintained reflexive field notes after each interview to separate personal assumptions from participant accounts and verified all emerging themes against verbatim transcript data to preserve analytical integrity (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Study rigor was established through detailed contextual descriptions of school infrastructure and workshop settings, combined with cross-participant data triangulation and a clear audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). Ethical approval was obtained prior to field work. All participants provided informed consent, and confidentiality was strictly maintained using pseudonyms and anonymized institutional locations to protect participants' contract employment status.

Findings

This section outlines five primary themes illustrating how the institutional work environment shaped the post-training transfer experiences of four technical education instructors (Bishesh, Darshan, Barsha, and Rajan). Analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019a) of qualitative data from unstructured interviews, the findings detail how workplace supports and systemic barriers determined whether newly acquired pedagogical practices were sustained or abandoned in their respective workplaces captured through five primary themes.

Table 2: Themes, Sub-themes and Initial Codes

Theme	Sub-theme	Initial Codes
Theme 1: Instructional Tools as Efficacy Support	1.1 Clear Planning and Instructional Confidence	Reliance on intuitive teaching; Standardized planning tools; Predictable milestones; Enhanced perceived competence; Transition to self-regulation
	1.2 Group Support and Relational Efficacy	Trainee peer bonding; Supportive professional networks; Workplace relatedness fulfilment; Safe adoption environment
	1.3 Practical Value and Autonomous Motivation	Practical utility focus; High motivation via practical skills; Theoretical module disconnect; Shift to routine compliance
Theme 2: Instructional Design Mismatch and Operational Constraints	2.1 Shortened Schedules and Curriculum Deficits	Time-intensive active methods; Truncated academic terms; Compressed teaching schedules; Syllabus rushing; Operational disruptions
	2.2 Capacity Constraints and Infrastructure Deficits	Large student cohorts; Workshop machine shortages; Forced return to traditional lecturing; Underutilized technical competence
	2.3 Short-Term Projects as Successful Settings	Project-based transfer success; Reliable funding and guidelines; Mandatory reporting oversight; Sustained instructional effort
Theme 3: Supervisory Leadership as a Transfer Determinant	3.1 Active Supervision and Continued Effort	Regular classroom audits; Constructive supervisory pressure; Performance recognition; Sustained long-term transfer
	3.2 Management Absence and Motivational Erosion	Supervisory unavailability; Superficial corridor checks; Absence of constructive feedback; Declining instructor drive
Theme 4: Administrative Delays and Asymmetric Accountability	4.1 Multi-Layered Approval Bottlenecks	Multi-department approval delays; Disempowered middle management; Restricting instructor autonomy; Practical class disruptions
	4.2 Material Shortages and Teaching Quality	Unresolved infrastructure gaps; Fee-paying student obligations; Resource-responsibility mismatch; Frustration and diminished competence
	4.3 Compliance-Oriented Auditing vs. Pedagogical Support	Asymmetric auditing priorities; Paperwork vs. resource double standards; Demotivation from one-sided checks; Penalty-driven form filling
Theme 5: Loss of Drive and Workplace Adaptation	5.1 Resistance to Change and Peer Pressure	Institutional inertia; Senior staff reluctance; Early-career social concerns; Peer-enforced conformity
	5.2 Limits of Individual Effort	Isolated initiative limits; Lack of collective teamwork; Reversion to passive routines
	5.3 Job Insecurity, Amotivation, and Turnover Intentions	Contract status barriers; Reduced discretionary effort; Persistent operational burnout; Amotivation and turnover intentions

Theme 1: Instructional Tools as Efficacy Support

Initial codes across all the transcripts revealed that participants returned to their technical schools with heightened personal efficacy and a clear intent to implement new pedagogical practices. Rather than deriving this confidence strictly from technical subject matter, where participants already possessed practical expertise, trainees attributed their initial readiness to acquiring systematic instructional tools.

Clear Planning and Instructional Confidence

Prior to training, participants reported relying primarily on intuitive, inherited teaching methods. The introduction of standardized planning tools, specifically lesson plans and performance guides, provided an operational structure that enhanced participants' perceived instructional competence.

> *"Before stepping into any classroom, an instructor must be completely clear about which chapter they are going to teach. Once I deliver these specific components, I will have successfully completed the upcoming class." (Darshan)*

Darshan's account illustrates how clear planning tools help frame classroom delivery from an uncertain task into a predictable sequence of professional milestones. By establishing clear boundaries for success, the lesson plan supports the instructor's psychological need for competence, replacing inherited instructional habits with self-regulated pedagogical choices.

Bishesh similarly reflected on how lesson planning disrupted passive, inherited routines:

> *"Performance Guides were followed regularly and were extremely helpful... A Lesson Plan gives an instructor an indispensable mental framework for how to structure a class. Before the training, instructors simply taught the way their own teachers used to teach them." (Bishesh)*

Bishesh's reflection highlights a major shift in how instructors view their role. Moving away from simply repeating how they were taught toward organized preparation allows them to take genuine ownership of their work, shifting their motivation from basic compliance to active self-direction. Within SDT, this internalization marks the transition from external compliance to autonomous self-regulation since the instructor takes up conscious ownership of the teaching process.

Group Support and Relational Efficacy

For early-career instructors, learning together built strong peer relationships, satisfying their need for connection and boosting early enthusiasm. Barsha recalled the supportive atmosphere:

> *"The training was wonderful, engaging, and rich in knowledge. We grew as close as brothers and sisters, making it quite difficult to part ways when the program ended." (Barsha)*

The emotional resonance of Barsha's reflection reveals that effective training programs can build strong supportive networks alongside skills. This shared peer identity satisfies the psychological need for relatedness, creating a safe space that fosters early instructional self-efficacy prior to returning to school environments.

Practical Value and Autonomous Motivation

Initial enthusiasm was not uniform across all modules. Motivation remained high only when instructors perceived a clear, direct link between course content and their immediate instructional needs. Bishesh highlighted a clear difference between practical pedagogical skills and generic theoretical lessons:

> *"I didn't feel I learned much of anything substantial [in the theoretical portion]. It felt like just another administrative requirement, something you attend simply to complete it." (Bishesh)*

Bishesh's distinction underscores that motivation appeared closely tied to practical usefulness. When training was perceived to lack immediate value for daily teaching, instructors lost interest, shifting their attitude from genuine engagement to routine compliance.

Theme 2: Instructional Design Mismatch and Operational Constraints

When instructors attempted using their new skills back at work, their experiences exposed a major gap between training models and actual school conditions. The ideal settings assumed during training were adequate instructional time, manageable class sizes, and working equipment which participants noted were largely absent in their technical schools or institutions.

Shortened Schedules and Curriculum Deficits

Instructors found that student-centred methods such as open discussions and interactive hooks consumed substantial time, making it difficult to cover mandated course outlines. Bishesh explained this temporal shortfall:

> *"In reality, we don't even get a full six months for a semester; actual instructional time is hardly four months. If an instructor strictly follows every step of the methodology in a typical classroom, a six-month semester course would end up taking nearly two years to complete." (Bishesh)*

Bishesh's calculation shows a sharp conflict between ideal teaching styles and tight academic schedules. Forcing time-intensive methods such as lectures into shortened terms creates severe pressure, which participants felt undercut their confidence in managing their courses.

Darshan noted that when unscheduled disruptions like power outages occurred, instructors felt forced to drop interactive methods just to finish syllabi on time:

> *"You cannot expect students to grasp concepts when a comprehensive topic, which ideally requires a full month of thorough instruction, is compressed into just five rushed days." (Darshan)*

Darshan's experience presents how sudden operational problems lead instructors to report feeling compelled to set aside student-centred methods in order to rush through content. This pressure limits instructor choices, encouraging them to prioritize administrative coverage over genuine student understanding.

Capacity Constraints and Infrastructure Deficits

A secondary mismatch emerged between the small-group work activities modelled during training and the reality of large, under-resourced practical workshops. Darshan showed how equipment shortages directly restricted pedagogical choices:

> *"If I have ten machines, I can engage ten students in practical work. But how do I manage the remaining thirty-eight students? Even when three or four instructors join forces, if I am supervising twelve students on the available machines, the rest cannot remain in the practical area because there is no equipment for them to use." (Darshan)*

Darshan's example presents how missing equipment sets strict limits on teaching style. In such situations, the instructor's technical competence becomes underutilized due to the situational constraints, forcing a return to traditional, lecture-based management. This resource-driven boundary shows how severe situational constraints can restrict instructor agency and suppress trained pedagogical behaviours.

2.3 Short-Term Projects as Successful Settings

All the participants identified one area where new methods worked well: short-term, externally funded project courses. Bishesh observed: *"When delivering short-term project trainings, the techniques were quite helpful, and we actively applied them." (Bishesh)*

The contrast between regular diploma courses and project-based training reveals that transfer is context-dependent. Project environments offer better resources and clearer guidelines, giving instructors the support needed to use what they learned.

Rajan attributed this success to clear oversight and reliable funding:

> *"Training programs under projects were implemented very effectively. In those project-backed events, reporting was strictly mandatory, creating clear obligations and maintaining high training standards. In contrast, regular school operations require no formal reporting on training transfer, making any extra effort feel like an unrewarded burden." (Rajan)*

Rajan's analysis illuminates how clear tracking shapes effort. In project settings, regular reporting and monitoring set clear expectations that keep standards high. In contrast, the lack of follow-up in standard school operations leaves extra instructional effort feeling ignored and unrewarded.

This contrast between project-backed classes and regular school operations provides a useful baseline for comparison. In project settings, essential conditions such as dedicated budgets, clear timelines, and required reporting were consistently maintained, allowing instructors to use student-centred methods. This illustrates that early-career instructors possess both the motivation and capability to use new methods when the immediate teaching environment supports them.

Theme 3: Supervisory Leadership as a Transfer Determinant

Data analysis revealed a wide gap between institutional settings with active, supportive leadership and those where management was absent or did only surface-level checks.

Active Supervision and Continued Effort

Bishesh was the sole participant who experienced regular classroom observations and document reviews from his principal. He described how direct oversight combined pressure with recognition:

> *"I recall my principal sir said to me. He said, 'I organized this training for you, so I want to see whether you are actually applying it.' It created a bit of pressure on me, but I took it positively. If a supervisor does not actively audit whether training methods are being used, training application will barely last six months." (Bishesh)*

The principal's direct involvement created a continuous link between training attendance and daily classroom teaching. By connecting training investment to performance expectations, leadership showed that teaching improvements mattered, supporting the instructor's sense of recognition and belonging. Without continuous monitoring, individual effort may fade under daily pressures; active leadership maintains commitment by treating new methods as an ongoing workplace priority.

Management Absence and Motivational Erosion

In contrast, the other three instructors experienced management absence or superficial checks. Darshan described administrative unavailability compels them resolve practical issues in isolation and consecutively demotivates their training transfer intention. On the other hand, Barsha noted that supervisory contact was reduced to checking basic physical presence:

> *"They typically just look in from the outside corridor to see if a teacher is physically present in the room. There is no formal classroom observation, so the question of receiving constructive feedback doesn't even arise." (Barsha)*

Ineffective monitoring such as corridor checks focus purely on physical presence while ignoring teaching quality. This lack of meaningful feedback was perceived by instructors as depriving them of professional recognition.

Rajan explicitly connected supervisory neglect to his own declining instructional drive:

> *"Monitoring is part of their job description, but they only ever did the bare minimum because it was mandatory. There was no meaningful follow-up or administrative support. Because of this lack of support, my motivation to apply new techniques gradually declined over time." (Rajan)*

Rajan's experience illustrates how supervisory neglect can directly drain instructor motivation. When leadership treats follow-up as a routine paperwork task, teachers may adopt the same attitude, slowly cutting back on their efforts to use new techniques.

Theme 4: Administrative Delays and Asymmetric Accountability

Trainee accounts confirmed that administrative delays, rather than personal reluctance, hindered teaching efforts.

Multi-Layered Approval Bottlenecks

Darshan and Barsha separately described identical administrative delays that disrupted practical classes:

> *"The store procures materials; accounts release the funds; and the principal sir signs off. If any one of these three administrative pillars is absent or uncooperative, work stops completely due to bureaucratic obligation. This bureaucracy severely cripples the supervisor's ability to function." (Darshan)*

Darshan outlines a slow management system where simple actions require signoffs across separate departments. This split setup leaves immediate supervisors unable to get instructors the materials they need. Barsha confirmed this structural barrier in nearly identical terms:

> *"Even if the Head of Department wants to help, bureaucratic delays stop everything... If any one of these three parties is absent or delayed, work grinds to a halt." (Barsha)*

Identical accounts across institutions confirm that administrative delays stem from regular system processes rather than individual personal disputes. This slow approval process limits instructor autonomy, leaving individual initiative ineffective against systemic delays.

Material Shortages and Teaching Quality

Persistent failure to secure essential teaching tools caused deep frustration among the participants. Darshan highlighted how management inaction compromised student learning:

> *"If classes cannot proceed without electricity, then how can the management just stay like that without purchasing a generator? Each student in a class of 48 pays around one point two lakhs in fees. Providing the necessary resources to complete their course is an obligation to the students." (Darshan)*

Darshan's account highlights a clear conflict between professional standards and management neglect. When basic facilities are neglected, instructors report feeling a loss of control over

their teaching, leaving staff feeling held accountable for student learning while lacking the resources to deliver it.

Compliance-Oriented Auditing vs. Pedagogical Support

Participants reported a clear imbalance between strict paperwork audits and poor resource provision with practical workshop resourcing being largely ignored.

> *"They demand that lesson plans be prepared, but they fail to show the same urgency when following up to supply the requested practical materials. Because of this one-sided accountability, instructors become demotivated and accept that this is just how the system operates." (Darshan)*

Instructors faced a clear double standard: management strictly enforced paperwork while ignoring practical workshop needs. Demanding detailed documentation without supplying teaching materials indicated to participants that administrative compliance mattered more than student learning. Enforcing administrative paperwork while neglecting practical workshop tools was described as shifting instructor orientation toward controlled regulation, gradually undermining genuine commitment to teaching quality.

Theme 5: Loss of Drive and Workplace Adaptation

The final theme highlights how instructors adapted over time after facing constant workplace hurdles. Initial enthusiasm steadily faded into routine compliance, accommodation to institutional norms, or motivational detachment.

Resistance to Change and Conformity to Traditional Norms

When instructors attempted to sustain new teaching techniques, they encountered an institutional culture shaped by long-serving staff who actively resisted change. As time passed, this social pressure became a major barrier to keeping training skills alive. Rajan highlighted this workplace divide:

> *"There is a divide among the staff: the younger instructors are limited in number, but they genuinely want change. The senior, long-serving instructors are reluctant to adopt new methods. Their attitude is essentially, why take on unnecessary hassle when things are already running." (Rajan)*

For early-career instructors, introducing innovative practices brought social friction, as senior colleagues viewed extra effort as an unnecessary disturbance. Rajan further observed how this status quo became the unofficial benchmark:

> *"Instructors started thinking, 'Even without using extra media, as long as I have the lesson in mind, the class still runs fine. This is how it's always been done, so why change?'..."*

Facing social pressure and seeing long-serving colleagues teach from outdated notes without administrative pushback, younger instructors shared that they were rather indirectly encouraged to abandon their new skills and conform to existing routines.

Limits of Isolated Individual Effort

In the absence of institutional backing and peer collaboration, participants realized that individual zeal was insufficient to sustain pedagogical transfer. This isolation created a clear tipping point in their daily practice, where early personal drive gave way to fatigue. Rajan noted that while proactive teachers initially benefited from tools like lesson plans, the burden of compliance fell unfairly on those who cared:

> *"The pressure falls disproportionately on those who comply, while non-compliant staff ignore it." (Rajan)*

Bishesh similarly reflected on the futility of isolated innovation:

> *"To help students adapt to modern trends, I realized that an individual effort isn't enough; everyone needs to work as a team to make a real impact... Ultimately, even the students lose motivation, because a single instructor trying to innovate cannot transform the system alone." (Bishesh)*

Bishesh and Rajan's shared realizations highlight a shift from initial confidence to pragmatic resignation. Without team alignment and systemic support, individual effort proved impossible to maintain, undermining autonomous motivation and forcing instructors back into standard lecture routines.

Job Insecurity, Amotivation, and Turnover Intentions

Contract status and administrative disinterest further accelerated this motivational decline. This final stage represents the cumulative outcome of the entire transfer process. When instructors return from training with high confidence and structured lesson plans, their initial efforts quickly run into short academic terms, large class sizes, and missing workshop tools. When these daily classroom struggles are met with passive supervision and long delays for basic supplies, instructors gradually infer that teaching quality is not an institutional priority. Over time, isolated in under-resourced classrooms and facing subtle pressure from senior peers to follow old habits, their early drive wears away completely.

Bishesh explained how employment status speeds up this withdrawal, as many instructors enter technical schools with a temporary mindset:

> *"Many instructors carry a temporary mindset: 'I might be at this institution today, but I won't be here tomorrow; I'm just waiting to secure a permanent government job somewhere else.'" (Bishesh)*

Rajan confirmed that employment precarity directly shapes long-term commitment:

> *"Internal commitment is also heavily tied to employment status, whether an instructor is permanent or on a temporary contract impacts their drive." (Rajan)*

When job insecurity is compounded by a lack of supervisory support, instructor disengagement reaches a critical point. Barsha described how unaddressed operational hurdles and continuous isolation led to severe burnout and thoughts of resignation:

> *"Because management simply assigns work without addressing operational hurdles, the communication gap remains huge. At times, this lack of support makes me feel like resigning." (Barsha)*

Barsha's account represents the end point of motivational degradation: complete amotivation accompanied by turnover intentions. Her experience outlines how training transfer is not a single point in time, but a continuous chain of events. When unresolved operational barriers, weak administrative support, and workplace resistance pile up over time, an instructor's initial desire to apply new skills ultimately collapses into minimal compliance or plans to quit the institution.

Discussions

This study explores how post-training instructional practices unfold after instructors return to their institutions. The central insight is that the workplace environment acts as a decisive boundary condition for transfer, where supervisory involvement, peer responses, resource access, and approval procedures operate together to shape whether initial enthusiasm sustains or yields to entrenched institutional routines.

Training Relevance and the Limits of Initial Readiness

The perceived usefulness of training is closely linked to participants' initial readiness to apply what they have learned. When training content directly matches daily teaching duties, instructors display higher confidence and stronger motivation to adopt new methods, aligning with research showing that perceived utility fosters autonomous transfer motivation (Blume et al., 2010; Gegenfurtner & Quesada-Pallarès, 2022; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

However, the findings indicate that initial motivation and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) are necessary but insufficient conditions for sustained transfer. High readiness does not guarantee long-term skill retention when workplace conditions offer limited support. While traditional literature often views motivation and environment as parallel, independent variables (Blume et al., 2010), this study shows that workplace environments actively shape and gradually diminish individual motivation over time.

Workload and Transfer Design

A central finding of this study is the sharp conflict between time-intensive, student-centred teaching methods and heavy workplace workloads. Facing compressed academic terms,

strict syllabus coverage demands, and large student cohorts, using interactive techniques becomes unmanageable, routinely forcing instructors to revert to traditional lectures (Bhurtel & Bhattarai, 2023a; Clarke, 2002).

This gap highlights a fundamental flaw in transfer design: effective training must reflect the realistic conditions and constraints of the work environment (Bates et al., 2012; Davids et al., 2017). Promoting time-consuming methods without considering schedule limits restricts instructors' opportunity to perform (Ford et al., 1992), establishing time as a critical resource for transfer (Kerins et al., 2021). Operationally, managing large student cohorts on limited equipment creates severe strain. Addressing this gap requires institutional strategies that reduce instructional load during skill demonstrations, such as providing teaching assistants or video-based instructional guides (Mayer, 2014; van Nooijen et al., 2024).

Reconceptualizing Supervisory and Peer Influences

Supervisor support emerges as a decisive condition for maintaining new instructional practices, helping explain why prior quantitative studies report inconsistent supervisor effects (Blume et al., 2010; Massenberg et al., 2017). Qualitative data indicate that support is most effective when encouragement is combined with active follow-up and monitoring (Davids et al., 2017; Lancaster et al., 2013). Rather than operating as separate functions, monitoring and encouragement are experienced as a single integrated signal that the institution values professional development, whereas supervisory silence communicates organizational neglect (Gagné & Deci, 2005). This point is clearly illustrated by participant experiences in project-backed training settings, where clear monitoring and reliable resources enabled instructors to apply their skills smoothly. This contrast shows that non-transfer in regular classes stems from unsupportive workplace conditions rather than a lack of instructor capability or interest.

Conversely, colleague interactions frequently emerged as unexpected impediments to skill transfer. While extant literature overwhelmingly conceptualizes peer support as an advantageous transfer driver (Yaghi & Bates, 2020), newly appointed instructors in this study encountered explicit peer pressure to conform to entrenched institutional routines. Therefore, peer influence cannot be treated as a universally positive antecedent; rather, its directionality is contingent upon organizational hierarchy and prevailing workplace culture.

Administrative Approval Procedures as Operational Barriers

This study extends the understanding of organizational support by illuminating how administrative processes directly constrain training transfer. Prior research has predominantly viewed organizational support through broad psychological lenses, such as perceived support or overall transfer climate (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Holton et al., 2000; Rouiller & Goldstein, 1993). However, instructors experienced a lack of support through rigid approval procedures involving multi-level administrative and financial checks.

When requests require multiple approvals, bureaucratic delays or missing signatures regularly prevent instructors from using new methods, even when leadership verbally supports training. This matches evidence that systemic workplace constraints, such as heavy workloads and time limits, restrict skill transfer despite high instructor willingness (Clarke, 2002; Kerins et al., 2021). Furthermore, it provides specific detail on how these administrative roadblocks operate within public technical schools (Peters & O'Connor, 1980; Rainey, 2014). This confirms that organizational support is not merely a general institutional attitude; it is concrete and reflected in whether routine administrative procedures enable or block instructors from using what they have learned.

Structural Constraints, Compliance, and Turnover Intentions

The decline from initial enthusiasm to routine compliance or turnover intent reflects how motivation erodes over time under unsupportive conditions (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Rather than acting as separate, isolated barriers, workplace obstacles interact in a continuous sequence. Initial instructional drive first collides with daily classroom constraints, is then weakened by supervisory silence and supply delays, and is finally worn down by peer pressure. Structure and agency theory explains this alignment, showing how organizational rules, resource constraints, and institutional norms typically override individual intentions during conflict (Giddens, 1984; Sewell, 1992). Early-career instructors adapt to rigid conditions by lowering teaching standards to minimal thresholds. When the divide between professional ideals and institutional reality creates persistent frustration, turnover intention becomes a strategic act of agency (Sewell, 1992) triggered by restricted opportunities for pedagogical reform.

Contributions to Knowledge and Practical Implications

This study advances knowledge on training transfer in public technical education in three distinct ways: (i) providing a process-oriented account of how training transfer unfolds as an interconnected sequence, where instructor motivation gradually degrades into minimal compliance or turnover intent due to compounding workplace obstacles; (ii) demonstrating that supervisory monitoring and encouragement function together as an integrated signal of institutional priorities; and (iii) showing that transfer climate is grounded in micro-level administrative approval workflows and realistic workload alignment (Bates et al., 2012; Bhurtel & Bhattarai, 2023a).

These theoretical insights offer practical implications for technical school leadership. In line with national TVET deficits (MoEST, 2022), ensuring high training transfer among instructors serves as a vital operational bridge to transform macro-level policy into tangible instructional performance. To achieve this, leadership must move beyond instructional course design, as sustaining initial learning requires aligning internal workplace conditions. First, pairing supervisory accountability with constructive guidance ensures follow-up functions as a clear signal of institutional value (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Second, streamlining procurement workflows prevents administrative delays from blocking resource access (Rainey, 2014). Third, establishing structured peer networks gives early-career instructors

support to try new methods without feeling isolated. Fourth, technical school management should support lead instructors during practical sessions by assigning assistant instructors or providing video-based instructional guides (Mayer, 2014; van Nooijen et al., 2024). Aligning supervisory practices, administrative workflows, instructional staffing, and peer support is essential for sustaining training investments.

Conclusion

This study analysed how newly appointed instructors in public technical schools in Nepal experience post-training instructional transfer. The findings demonstrate that while relevant training builds initial motivation and self-efficacy, personal readiness alone cannot sustain long-term teaching changes when instructors return to workplaces marked by rigid administrative approval steps, resource deficits, heavy workloads, and unsupportive peer norms. By conceptualizing supervisory engagement, administrative workflows, and peer interactions as an interconnected operational system, this research illustrates how workplace conditions directly shape skill and sequentially erode application during the post-training transition from initial enthusiasm down to minimal compliance. While these qualitative findings specifically reflect early-career, temporary contract instructors across four provinces in Nepal, their transferability applies to similar public-sector training contexts where bureaucracy and resource limits constrain skill application. Ultimately, sustaining instructor training investments depends on technical school leadership actively aligning internal workplace conditions to support educators throughout this critical transition.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available due to confidentiality and ethical considerations. The data may be made available by the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to appropriate ethical and confidentiality requirements

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests relevant to this article.

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Declaration of Generative AI Use

The authors used generative artificial intelligence (AI) based language tools to assist with grammatical correction, sentence refinement, and overall language clarity. The use of these tools was limited to editorial and language-related purposes. All research decisions, data analysis, interpretation, arguments, and conclusions were developed and verified by the authors, who remain fully responsible for the final manuscript.

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Review Article

Higher Education, Training, and Employability in Nepal: Bridging Academic Credentials, Competence, and Labor-Market Dynamics

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Abstract

Nepal has expanded access to higher education and technical and vocational education and training (TVET), yet the transition from educational attainment to competence and productive employment remains uneven. This study examines the relationship among academic credentials, competence and employability in Nepal through secondary data and published literature. Evidence from University Grants Commission/ Education Management Information System data, policy documents and relevant studies indicates substantial concentration of enrolment in selected fields, gaps between academic preparation and workplace expectations, weak education-employment linkages, and limited articulation between higher education and TVET. The findings suggest that Nepal's challenge is not simply a skills gap but a wider coordination problem involving curriculum relevance, applied learning, employer engagement, career guidance, institutional capacity and labour-market opportunities. The study argues for stronger connections among education, training, competence development and employment to support more effective transitions from learning to productive work.

Keywords: higher education; TVET; employability; skills mismatch; labour market

Introduction

Higher education is widely regarded as an investment in human capital because it can increase knowledge, analytical capacity, technical expertise, and productive capabilities (Schultz, 1961; Becker, 1964). However, educational attainment does not automatically translate into occupational competence or employment. In labour markets characterised by information asymmetry, educational qualifications can provide employers with information about applicants' expected productivity and influence hiring decisions (Spence, 1973). A credential, however, is not the same as demonstrated competence in a particular occupation. This distinction becomes important when the expansion of higher education is not matched

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by sufficient employment opportunities or by learning experiences that develop relevant practical and transferable capabilities. In such circumstances, educational qualifications may become increasingly important for access to employment even when the connection between formal education and occupational capability remains weak. Dore (1976) described a related process as the "diploma disease," in which educational certificates become increasingly important for occupational selection and qualification levels rise without a corresponding improvement in the substantive quality of education. Dore linked this process to an imbalance between the number of educated job seekers and the availability of suitable modern-sector employment, particularly in developing economies (Dore, 1976). The distinction between credentials, competence, and employment is therefore central to understanding whether expansion in higher education produces meaningful economic and social outcomes. Sociological perspective of credentialism similarly show that formal qualifications can function as a screening and social-closure mechanism in labour markets, sometimes independently of the skills they are assumed to certify (Brown, 2001; Araki, 2020).

Nepal provides an important context for examining this relationship. Higher education has expanded substantially over recent decades, reflecting increasing demand for tertiary qualifications and wider institutional provision. Higher education management information system at The University Grants Commission (UGC) provides evidence of the scale of Nepal's higher education system and its continuing expansion (UGC, 2025). However, increased participation in higher education does not by itself establish that graduates possess the competencies required in the workplace or that the economy can provide sufficient opportunities to use those competencies productively. Nepal Human Capital Review reports that many young Nepalis face difficulties entering the labour market even after completing their education and identifies limited job creation, widespread informality, and low labour-force participation as important constraints on the use of human capital (World Bank, 2025). The employment situation of young people also presents persistent challenges. An International Labour Organization (ILO) review of youth employment policies in Nepal reported high youth unemployment, widespread informal employment among young workers, and substantial labour migration in response to limited domestic employment opportunities (Thapa & Ameratunga Kring, 2016). These conditions indicate that the problem cannot be understood simply as insufficient educational attainment. It also concerns the relationship between what learners acquire through education and training, what they can demonstrate in occupational settings, and the opportunities available for them to use those capabilities in productive work. More recent evidence indicates that labour migration (Pyakurel, 2016; Pyakurel, 2018; Paudel & Pyakurel, 2018) and education-led migration now operate as parallel exit pathways for Nepali youth, shaped by household resources and perceived domestic employment prospects rather than by education or skills alone (Chuwan, 2026; Pudasaini, 2025).

While going through the concept of a credential-competence-employability gap, there is a need to examine the disconnection among academic qualifications, demonstrated competence, and labour-market outcomes in Nepal. It extends to deal with an idea of a skills gap by recognising that skills mismatch can take several forms, including overqualification, underqualification, skills gaps, skills shortages, field-of-study mismatch, and skills obsolescence (ILO, 2019). As the issue is also the institutional processes through which academic knowledge is converted not only into practical and transferable competence including curriculum design, teaching and learning, assessment, technical and vocational education and training, but also to workplace exposure, career guidance, employer engagement, entrepreneurship education, and continuing skills development.

The challenge therefore has both education-side and labour-market dimensions. It concerns not only what higher education and training institutions provide, but also the availability and quality of employment opportunities through which competencies can be developed, demonstrated, and rewarded. Against this background, the paper examines the relationship among higher education, training, competence, and employability in Nepal through an integrative review of Nepalese and international literature. Particular attention is given to the relationship between higher education and Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), curriculum and pedagogy, university-industry engagement, career guidance, entrepreneurship, and technology-enabled skills development. It is argued that Nepal's challenge extends beyond a narrow skills mismatch. It involves a wider disconnection among educational credentials, competence development, labour-market requirements, and employment opportunities. Bringing these dimensions together provides a basis for understanding how Nepal can strengthen the transition from formal learning to demonstrated competence and productive employment.

Literature Review: Education, Skills and Employability

The relationship between education, skills and employability is often presented as a linear process in which education provides knowledge, training develops skills, skills improve employability, and employability leads to employment (Pyakurel, 2024). This view is too simple to explain the relationship between higher education and the labour market. Educational qualifications, skills, competence, employability and employment are distinct concepts, although they are closely related. Employability is influenced by individual attributes, career identity, adaptability, social and human capital, and labour-market conditions (Fugate et al., 2004; Yorke, 2006). Graduate employability also depends on the interaction of human capital, social capital, individual attributes, behaviours and labour-market factors rather than on generic skills alone (Clarke, 2018). The relationship between education and employment therefore cannot be understood only in terms of what individuals acquire through formal education and training. It also requires attention to how knowledge and skills are developed, applied, demonstrated and valued in particular work contexts. This broader perspective provides a useful basis for examining the relationship among academic credentials, competence and employability.

Education, Knowledge, and Capability

Education provides a foundation for developing knowledge, intellectual capacity and the ability to learn. The contribution of higher education extends beyond immediate preparation for a particular occupation. University study can develop disciplinary knowledge, critical thinking, analytical reasoning, problem-solving and the capacity to address unfamiliar problems. These capabilities are relevant to employability because graduates may need to apply knowledge in situations that differ from those encountered during their studies. Employability should therefore not be understood simply as the possession of a degree or as the probability of obtaining a job. Yorke (2006) defines employability in terms of the achievements, skills, understanding and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to obtain employment and succeed in their chosen occupations. This distinction separates employability from employment itself. A graduate may possess capabilities that support employment but still face barriers arising from labour-market conditions, limited opportunities or competition for available positions.

The growing expectation that higher education should contribute to graduate employability has also expanded the discussion beyond subject knowledge and generic skills. Tomlinson (2017) argues for a multidimensional understanding of graduate employability based on five forms of graduate capital: human, social, cultural, psychological and identity capital. These resources influence how graduates prepare for and negotiate transitions into the labour market (Tomlinson, 2017). Clarke (2018) similarly argues that graduate employability should be examined through the interaction of human capital, social capital, individual attributes, behaviours, perceived employability and labour-market factors. This perspective is important because the relationship between higher education and employment is not determined by educational attainment alone. The educational process can contribute to employability through knowledge, skills, experience, confidence, professional networks and career development, but these resources acquire value partly through their interaction with employment contexts.

From Skills to Competence

The concept of skills extends beyond occupation-specific technical abilities. Skills may include technical and cognitive capabilities as well as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, digital skills and self-management. The ILO identifies several forms of skills mismatch, including skill gaps, skill shortages, overqualification, underqualification, field-of-study mismatch and skill obsolescence (ILO, 2019). This wider view is useful because the relationship between education and work cannot be reduced to whether graduates possess a particular technical skill. The relevance of a skill also depends on the context in which it is applied and on the requirements of particular occupations.

Possessing a skill, however, is not necessarily the same as demonstrating competence. In education and training literature, competence is closely associated with the ability to apply knowledge and skills effectively in a defined context. Competence therefore involves

more than knowing or possessing a skill. It concerns what an individual can demonstrate through performance. In higher education, this distinction is important because students may acquire substantial theoretical knowledge without having sufficient opportunities to apply that knowledge in professional situations. Competence becomes more visible when individuals can use knowledge and skills to solve problems, perform tasks, make decisions, communicate and respond appropriately to workplace demands.

The distinction between academic credentials and demonstrated competence is therefore central to this study. A credential provides formal recognition of educational attainment, whereas competence concerns the effective application of knowledge and skills in a relevant context. The two can reinforce one another, but they are not synonymous. Higher education can contribute to competence through learning experiences that connect academic knowledge with practice. Work-integrated learning, internships, fieldwork, laboratory activities, simulations and project-based learning can provide opportunities for students to apply knowledge, develop practical capabilities and reflect on their learning. The CareerEDGE model developed by Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007), for example, links degree knowledge, generic skills, experience, career development learning, emotional intelligence and reflection to the development of graduate employability. Bridgstock (2009) further argues that employability involves more than generic graduate skills and includes career-management capabilities that enable graduates to navigate and manage their career development. These perspectives support a broader understanding of the education-to-work relationship in which academic learning, practical experience, personal capabilities and career development contribute jointly to employability.

Understanding Employability

Employability is a multidimensional concept and should not be treated as synonymous with employment. Employment is an outcome that depends partly on the availability and characteristics of jobs, while employability refers to the achievements, capabilities and personal attributes that influence an individual's ability to obtain employment and function effectively in work. Yorke (2006) describes employability as a necessary but not sufficient condition for gaining employment. This distinction is important because labour-market conditions can affect employment outcomes even when individuals possess relevant capabilities. Fugate et al. (2004) conceptualise employability as a psychosocial construct comprising career identity, personal adaptability, and social and human capital. Their framework places employability within a broader process of career-related adaptation rather than treating it as a fixed set of technical skills. Bridgstock (2009) adds an important career-management dimension and argues that graduates need capabilities that help them build and manage their careers in changing labour markets. These perspectives indicate that employability involves both what individuals possess and how they use those resources as they navigate career transitions. More recent scholarship has further challenged narrowly skills-centred approaches to graduate employability. Clarke (2018) proposes a multidimensional

framework that includes human capital, social capital, individual attributes, individual behaviours, perceived employability and labour-market factors. Her framework highlights the importance of context and cautions against treating graduate employment outcomes as the direct result of generic skills acquired through higher education. Tomlinson (2017) similarly develops a graduate-capital model that identifies human, social, cultural, identity and psychological resources as important components of employability and labour-market transitions. These perspectives suggest that employability develops through interactions among individual capabilities, accumulated resources, career behaviour and the social and institutional contexts in which graduates seek and perform work. Employability is therefore better understood as a dynamic and context-dependent capacity than as a fixed attribute that an individual either possesses or lacks.

Employability and Skills Mismatch

Skills mismatch provides an important link between education, skills and labour-market outcomes. It refers broadly to situations in which the skills or qualifications of workers do not correspond adequately to the requirements of their jobs. Mismatch is not a single phenomenon. It can involve overqualification, underqualification, skill gaps, skill shortages, field-of-study mismatch and skills obsolescence (Bergin et al., 2019). These forms of mismatch have different causes and consequences and therefore require different policy responses (Bergin et al., 2019). The distinction between qualification mismatch and skills mismatch is particularly important for graduate employability. A graduate may hold a qualification that is relevant to an occupation but lack some of the practical capabilities required for effective performance. Conversely, a worker may possess relevant skills but hold a job that requires a lower level of formal qualification. Qualification and skills therefore cannot be treated as interchangeable measures of occupational capability.

Mismatch also cannot be attributed automatically to deficiencies in graduates or to weaknesses in education and training. Labour demand, employer recruitment practices, occupational structures, geographical differences and the availability of suitable jobs can influence whether workers find employment that matches their qualifications and skills. Bergin et al. (2019) show that skills and educational mismatch in low- and middle-income countries is associated with different labour-market conditions and has implications for productivity, labour-force participation, unemployment and informality. The ILO also notes that skills mismatch can reflect differences between the skills sought by employers and those possessed by individuals, while emphasising the need for adaptation, upskilling and reskilling throughout working life (ILO, 2019). This broader understanding is important for Nepal because graduate underemployment or employment outside a field of study may reflect both gaps in individual capabilities and limitations in the structure and availability of suitable employment.

Study Methods

This study uses secondary data to examine the relationship among higher education, training, competence and employability in Nepal. Sources were selected based on their relevance to the study's central themes, including curriculum relevance, competence development, work-based learning, employer engagement, skills mismatch, career guidance, institutional capacity and transitions from education to employment. The evidence was organised thematically and interpreted in relation to the study's central focus on the connection between educational credentials, demonstrated competence and labour-market outcomes.

For the quantitative, the graduates-to-enrolment figure published by UGC/HEMIS is treated as a descriptive aggregate indicator, calculated by dividing the number of graduates recorded in 2024/25 by the number of students enrolled in the same academic year. It is not a cohort completion or graduation rate, because the enrolled and graduating students do not necessarily represent the same student cohort. The quantitative data are therefore used to describe the composition of enrolment and graduate output rather than to infer individual-level completion, dropout or employment outcomes. Because the study relies on aggregate administrative data, secondary literature and selected sector-specific studies, it cannot establish causal relationships or provide nationally representative estimates of graduate competence or employment outcomes. These limitations are taken into account when interpreting the findings and their implications.

Finding and Analysis

Evolution and Structure of Higher Education

Tribhuvan University was established in 1959 and remained Nepal's only university until the establishment of Mahendra Sanskrit University in 1986. The system then diversified through the establishment of Kathmandu University in 1991, Purbanchal University in 1994, Pokhara University in 1997 and subsequent universities and specialised institutions (UGC, 2024). The expansion of affiliated and community provision allowed universities to extend programmes beyond their constituent campuses and contributed to the geographical expansion of higher education. The UGC's institutional records show that Nepal's higher education system now includes different types of universities, academies and campuses, including constituent, community and private institutions (UGC, 2025). This structure has increased access, but it also creates substantial differences in institutional size, resources, academic capacity and quality-assurance arrangements. The UGC has developed a national quality assurance and accreditation system that applies to different categories of higher education institutions, including constituent, affiliated community and private campuses (UGC, 2022). The existence of this system reflects the importance of maintaining common standards across a diverse higher education sector.

Tribhuvan University remains particularly important within this structure because of its scale and extensive network of constituent and affiliated campuses. The UGC's 2023/24 higher education report states that TU accounted for more than 78 percent of total higher education enrolment at that time (UGC, 2024). This concentration gives TU considerable importance for any national discussion of curriculum, teaching quality, assessment, student support, career guidance and graduate outcomes. At the same time, the scale of the university creates challenges for maintaining consistent academic standards and responding quickly to changing labour-market requirements across a large and geographically dispersed network. The expansion of affiliated provision has helped increase access, but affiliation alone does not ensure similar levels of institutional capacity, student support or engagement with employers across campuses. UGC quality-assurance arrangements therefore have an important role in strengthening institutional standards and accountability.

Awale (2020) examined market orientation among constituent and affiliated TU colleges and found that most colleges in the study were not strongly market-oriented. The study examined dimensions that included student orientation, employer orientation, competition orientation and integration of organisational activities, and found positive relationships among student orientation, employer orientation and integrated activities (Awale, 2020). This is directly relevant to the credential-competence-employability issue examined in this paper.

The development of TVET adds another important dimension to Nepal’s post-secondary landscape. CTEVT provides programmes across areas such as engineering, health, agriculture, forestry, hospitality and other occupational fields and uses different institutional arrangements that include constituent, affiliated, partnership and technical schools (CTEVT, 2026). Its responsibilities include the development of competency-based curricula and occupational skill standards, quality control, skills testing and coordination among TVET stakeholders (CTEVT, 2026). This gives TVET a more explicit occupational orientation than many academic higher education programmes. However, the existence of separate higher education and TVET systems does not by itself create effective connections between them. Progression routes, recognition of prior learning, credit transfer, workplace learning and movement between academic and occupational pathways remain important considerations for a coherent post-secondary system. The central issue is therefore not whether Nepal has expanded its educational and training provision. It is whether the different parts of the system provide connected pathways through which learners can acquire knowledge, develop competence, demonstrate their capabilities and move into productive work.

Technical and Vocational Education and Training

Nepal's TVET system developed through a different institutional pathway from conventional higher education. The CTEVT, established in 1989, is the national autonomous apex body for TVET. Its responsibilities include TVET policy development, curriculum development,

quality control, affiliation, occupational skill standards and skills testing (CTEVT, 2026). TVET provision includes short-term training as well as pre-diploma and diploma-level technical programmes across occupational fields. Its orientation is more explicitly connected to occupational competence and employment than that of general academic education, although the two sectors overlap in some professional and technical fields.

The Government of Nepal's *TVET Sector Strategic Plan 2023-2032* identifies several persistent challenges in the sector, including declining enrolment, supply-demand disparities, quality and relevance, governance, institutional capacity and infrastructure. The plan places emphasis on quality improvement, stronger governance, institutional capacity, labour-market relevance and greater coherence across TVET provision (Government of Nepal, 2023). Lamsal and Bajracharya (2023), in their analysis of the Strategic Plan, similarly identify declining participation, supply-demand disparity and concerns about quality and relevance as major issues facing the sector. These concerns suggest that increasing the number of training providers or programmes is not sufficient. The effectiveness of TVET depends on whether programmes respond to occupational requirements and whether learners develop competencies that can be demonstrated and used in workplaces.

Recent empirical research provides further evidence of weak links between TVET provision and the employment system. Paudel, Parajuli and Bhattarai (2025) examined the participation of education and employment actors in curriculum design, implementation and feedback in Nepal's TVET system. Their study found that education actors have greater influence over curriculum standards and that employers remain less involved in formal curriculum processes. The authors conclude that the relationship between education and employment remains weak and is influenced by supply-driven governance, unclear roles and limited employer participation (Paudel et al., 2025). This finding is important for the present study because labour-market relevance cannot be achieved simply by adding practical subjects to a curriculum. It also depends on whether employers and other labour-market actors contribute to identifying occupational requirements, reviewing curricula, supporting workplace learning and providing feedback on the competencies developed by learners.

Academic-Vocational Divide

The relationship between higher education and TVET is an important structural issue in Nepal's post-secondary education system. Although the two sectors have complementary purposes, they have developed through different institutional structures, policy arrangements and educational cultures. Academic education has generally been associated with progression to higher qualifications and professional occupations, while TVET has a stronger orientation towards occupational preparation and practical competence. The distinction can contribute to separation between academic and vocational pathways. Learners may face difficulties moving from vocational qualifications into higher academic study, while academic and vocational institutions may have limited mechanisms for recognising each other's learning outcomes and competencies. Such separation can restrict the flexibility of learners who

need to move between education, training and employment during their working lives. Nepal approved the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) in 2020. The framework integrates general education and the National Vocational Qualifications Framework and is intended to support multiple learning pathways, recognition of qualifications, lifelong learning and greater permeability between education and TVET (National Vocational Qualifications System [NVQS], 2026). The framework provides an important policy basis for connecting qualifications across the education and training system. However, approval of the framework does not by itself establish effective articulation in practice. Current CTEVT initiatives continue to emphasise the need for lateral entry options, credit transfer and bridge courses for diploma graduates seeking further education (CTEVT, 2025). These developments indicate that permeability remains an implementation issue rather than a fully resolved feature of the system.

From Parallel Systems to an Integrated Post-Secondary Ecosystem

Nepal's higher education and TVET systems provide different forms of learning and preparation for work, but they do not always function as parts of a coherent post-secondary system. Higher education provides disciplinary, professional and analytical knowledge, while TVET places greater emphasis on technical and occupational competence. These capabilities are not mutually exclusive. University graduates may need practical, digital and transferable skills, while TVET graduates may need opportunities for further education, technological updating and professional progression. Both groups may also need continuing learning as occupational requirements change. An integrated post-secondary system would therefore provide clearer pathways among education, training, employment and further learning. Such pathways could include credit transfer, recognition of prior learning, modular qualifications, bridging programmes, work-based learning, internships, joint university-industry initiatives and continuing professional education. The objective would not be to merge higher education and TVET into a single institutional structure. It would be to make the boundaries between them more permeable and to give learners greater flexibility to move between different forms of learning and work.

This direction is consistent with Nepal's policy emphasis on qualifications pathways, lifelong learning and labour-market relevance. The National Qualifications Framework is intended to support multiple pathways and greater permeability between general education and TVET (National Vocational Qualifications System [NVQS], 2026). The TVET Sector Strategic Plan 2023-2032 also places emphasis on quality, relevance, governance, institutional capacity and stronger connections between training and labour-market requirements (Government of Nepal, 2023). However, policy recognition of these objectives does not mean that integration has already been achieved. Current initiatives related to lateral entry, credit transfer and bridge courses show that practical articulation between pathways remains an area of development (CTEVT, 2025). The significance of Nepal's higher education and TVET landscape for employability therefore lies not simply in the number of institutions or students. It lies in the extent to which learners can move from knowledge to competence,

from competence to productive work, and from employment to further learning. This question provides an important institutional context for examining the relationship among academic credentials, competence and employability.

Empirical Evidence of the Education-Employability Mismatch

The distinction between credentials, competence and employability becomes more significant when examined against evidence on Nepal's labour market and graduate outcomes. The available evidence indicates that the challenge is not simply limited access to post-secondary education. It also concerns the relationship between fields of study, qualifications, skills and the types of employment available to graduates. Recent World Bank evidence shows that skills mismatch has increased in Nepal and that overeducation among university graduates rose from about 25 percent in 2006 to approximately 34 percent in 2021 (World Bank, 2025). The same analysis reports substantial horizontal mismatch among tertiary-educated workers, particularly in fields such as engineering, manufacturing and construction, social sciences, business and law. It also finds especially high field-of-study mismatch among high-level TVET graduates, which suggests that the issue extends beyond university education (World Bank, 2025). These findings are important because they show that educational expansion does not automatically produce a corresponding expansion in employment that uses graduates' qualifications and fields of study.

The nature of employment creation also matters. The World Bank's recent analysis indicates that labour demand in Nepal has not expanded sufficiently in ways that absorb tertiary-educated workers into jobs that use their higher-level qualifications and specialised knowledge (World Bank, 2025). The *Nepal Human Capital Review* similarly reports difficulties in the transition from education into employment and identifies limited job creation, widespread informality and low labour-force participation as constraints on the productive use of human capital (World Bank, 2025). This evidence cautions against interpreting graduate mismatch simply as a failure of individuals to acquire adequate skills. Some mismatch may reflect weaknesses in curricula and training, but some also reflects the structure of labour demand and the limited supply of suitable employment opportunities. The empirical evidence also points to differences across fields of study, levels of education and types of institution. A graduate may obtain employment but work in an occupation unrelated to the field of study or below the qualification level. Another graduate may possess relevant technical capabilities but lack access to suitable employment, workplace experience or professional networks. These situations have different implications for education and training policy.

Concentration of Enrolment across Fields of Study

The UGC's Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS) provides an important administrative source for examining the distribution of students across fields of study in Nepal. The 2024/25 HEMIS data used in this study indicate substantial concentration

in a small number of broad academic fields. Management accounts for the largest share of enrolment, followed by Education and Humanities and Social Sciences. Science and Technology, Engineering and Medicine account for smaller shares of total enrolment, while Agriculture and Forestry represent relatively small proportions of the overall student population (UGC, 2025). This distribution suggests that Nepal's higher education system continues to attract a large proportion of students into general academic and professional fields, while enrolment in several technical, scientific and agriculture-related disciplines remains comparatively limited. The figures should be interpreted as a description of the composition of higher education rather than as evidence that particular fields are inherently more or less valuable.

The concentration of students in Management, Education, Humanities and Social Sciences deserves attention, but it should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of economically unproductive education or irrational student choice. These fields make important contributions to schools, public administration, business, professional services, civil society and other areas of the economy and society. The more relevant question is whether the scale and composition of enrolment correspond sufficiently to current and emerging labour-market opportunities. Educational choices are influenced by many factors, including cost, geographical accessibility, admission requirements, family expectations, perceived social status, employment prospects and opportunities for further study. Institutions may also find it easier to expand programmes that require less investment in laboratories, equipment and other specialised infrastructure. The resulting distribution of enrolment is therefore likely to reflect the interaction of student preferences, institutional provision and expectations about employment rather than a simple failure of either students or institutions to respond to labour-market demand.

This distinction is important for the present study. A concentration of enrolment in particular fields does not establish a skills mismatch by itself. Evidence of mismatch requires information on graduates' occupations, fields of work, skill requirements, earnings, unemployment, underemployment and the relationship between qualifications and actual job requirements. Nevertheless, a highly concentrated distribution of enrolment raises an important policy question about whether programme provision is sufficiently responsive to changes in the structure of the economy. The question becomes particularly relevant when the economy is expected to require greater technical, digital and professional capabilities but does not generate enough suitable employment opportunities for graduates. The World Bank's recent assessment of Nepal highlights both the expansion of human capital and the difficulty of converting that human capital into productive employment because of limited job creation, widespread informality and weak transitions from education into work (World Bank, 2025).

Table 1. Enrolment and Graduate Output by Faculty, Nepal Higher Education, 2024/25

Faculty	Enrolment	% of Total	Graduates	% of Total	Graduates/ Enrolment*
Management	323,428	44.84	51,360	44.23	0.159
Education	158,976	22.04	19,616	16.89	0.123
Humanities & Social Sciences	76,552	10.61	16,109	13.87	0.210
Science & Technology	66,293	9.19	8,797	7.58	0.133
Engineering	40,615	5.63	6,054	5.21	0.149
Medicine	32,493	4.51	8,764	7.55	0.270
Law	9,345	1.30	2,911	2.51	0.312
Agriculture	8,214	1.14	1,468	1.26	0.179
Forestry	1,881	0.26	835	0.72	0.444
Sanskrit	2,915	0.40	134	0.12	0.046
Buddhist Studies	534	0.07	64	0.06	0.120
Total	721,246	100.00	116,112	100	0.161

*Note: The graduates/enrolment figure is a descriptive ratio of graduates recorded in 2024/25 to students enrolled in the same academic year. It should **not** be interpreted as a cohort completion or graduation rate because the graduates and enrolled students do not necessarily represent the same student cohort.* Source: UGC, HEMIS Report 2024/25.

Graduate Output and Field-of-Study Concentration

Graduate output provides a second perspective on the structure of Nepal's higher education system. The 2024/25 HEMIS data used in this study record 116,112 graduates. Management accounts for the largest share of recorded graduates, followed by Education and Humanities and Social Sciences. Engineering and Science and Technology contribute smaller shares, while Medicine accounts for a relatively larger share of graduates than its share of total enrolment (UGC, 2025). Taken together, the figures indicate that graduate output is concentrated in a relatively small number of fields. This concentration is relevant to the study because the composition of graduate supply can influence the relationship between higher education and employment. However, graduate concentration alone does not establish labour-market mismatch. A meaningful assessment requires evidence on where graduates work, whether their occupations correspond to their fields of study, whether they use the competencies developed through education, and whether they experience unemployment or underemployment. The distinction between graduate supply and labour-market demand is particularly important in Nepal. A large number of graduates in Management or Education does not necessarily indicate an oversupply if the economy and public sector can absorb them into appropriate occupations. Conversely, relatively small graduate numbers in technical or scientific fields do not necessarily imply a shortage because demand also depends on the number and quality of jobs available. The World Bank's recent analysis indicates that

Nepal faces a broader employment challenge: domestic job creation has not kept pace with the number of people entering working age, while much employment remains informal and low in productivity (World Bank, 2025). The relationship between field of study and employability must therefore be examined alongside the structure of labour demand.

From Academic Attainment to Employability

National enrolment and graduation data cannot establish whether graduates possess the capabilities required for employment. Evidence from Nepalese studies, however, points to gaps between academic preparation and workplace expectations in several professional contexts. Sharma (2023), based on interviews with employers from private companies employing engineers, found that employers considered practical and enterprising skills, proactiveness, learning aptitude, innovation and creativity important aspects of engineering graduate employability. The study also reported concerns that existing examination and evaluation practices did not adequately develop some of these capabilities (Sharma, 2023). This evidence illustrates an important distinction between academic achievement and occupational competence. A student may perform well in formal assessment while having limited opportunities to demonstrate the practical, behavioural and interpersonal capabilities required in professional settings.

Evidence from other professional fields points in a similar direction, although the findings are context-specific. Shrestha (2024) examined self-perceived employability skills among 90 hospitality undergraduate student pairs before and after internships. The study found a difference between students' perceived skill expectations and their perceived level of skill possession and reported that off-campus internships provided hands-on learning opportunities that helped students identify gaps in their capabilities (Shrestha, 2024). In teacher education, Kadel (2021) used qualitative interviews with eight pre-service teachers at Tribhuvan University and reported perceived weaknesses in higher-order thinking, personal and social skills and communication skills, despite students' academic preparation in their subject areas. The study also identified limitations in the curriculum related to employability skills (Kadel, 2021). Similar findings are observed in other community campuses in Nepal: a tracer study of graduates from Kalika Multiple Campus in Pokhara found that most graduates were employed, predominantly in temporary teaching and assistant positions, and identified digital-skills training and curriculum relevance as priority areas for improvement (Gautam, 2025). These findings related to Nepal are consistent with a substantial international literature on graduate employability skills. Cross-national surveys and reviews consistently identify communication, problem-solving, teamwork, adaptability and related soft skills as the attributes employers value most, while also finding persistent gaps between the skills graduates believe they possess and what employers expect (Tushar & Sooraksa, 2023; Succi & Canovi, 2020; Rakowska & de Juana-Espinosa, 2021). Analyses of job-vacancy data further indicate that demand for such skills is intensifying alongside digital and technological change rather than being displaced by it (Poláková et al., 2023).

Training and Labour-Market Outcomes

Evidence from Nepal's TVET sector provides an important complement to the evidence from conventional higher education. Vocational training can produce measurable labour-market benefits when programmes are targeted towards relevant skills and participants have realistic opportunities to use those skills. Chakravarty et al. (2019) evaluated a large vocational training intervention for young people in Nepal using a regression-discontinuity design. Twelve months after training began, the authors found an increase of about 10 percentage points in non-farm employment in the intention-to-treat estimates, with larger effects among programme compliers. They also found substantial gains in monthly earnings. The strongest effects were associated with women who entered self-employment (Chakravarty et al., 2019). These findings provide relatively strong causal evidence that a targeted vocational training intervention can improve labour-market outcomes under particular programme and economic conditions.

Evidence on skills testing provides a related but different perspective. A study of 305 graduates short-term vocational training who had participated in Level-One skills testing under Nepal's national skills-testing system perceived that the skills test as contributing to access to employment, work performance and subsequent career prospects (Pandit & Pasa, 2020). Most of the respondents were working in the occupational sectors for which they had received training. These findings suggest that formal assessment and recognition of occupational skills can have value in the transition from training to employment. However, the study used a survey of skills-tested graduates and relied largely on participants' perceptions. It therefore provides evidence of perceived contribution rather than a causal estimate of the employment effect of skills certification. This distinction is important when assessing the effectiveness of Nepal's skills-testing system.

The TVET evidence also shows that training outcomes depend on the relationship between training institutions and the employment system. Paudel et al. (2025) found that relationships between education and employment actors in Nepal's TVET system remain insufficiently developed, particularly in curriculum design, implementation and feedback. Their findings suggest that employers have limited involvement in processes through which training content and competencies are defined and reviewed (Paudel et al., 2025). This concern is consistent with the broader evidence on skills mismatch: training can be effective when learners acquire capabilities that are relevant to actual opportunities, but the benefits are less likely to be sustained when training provision is disconnected from labour-market requirements.

Discussion

Taken together, the evidence does not support the conclusion that Nepal simply has “too many graduates” or that universities produce graduates who are uniformly unemployable. The findings point to a more complex relationship among educational expansion, competence development and employment opportunities. Higher education enrolment

and graduate output are concentrated in a limited number of fields, while studies from engineering, hospitality and teacher education identify gaps between academic preparation and some workplace expectations (Sharma, 2023; Shrestha, 2024; Kadel, 2021). At the same time, evidence from TVET shows that well-designed training can improve labour-market outcomes and that work-based learning can support the development of technical, generic and personal skills (Chakravarty et al., 2019; Thapa, 2024), suggesting that the quantity of education alone is not a central issue. Rather, it is all about what students learn, what they can demonstrate, where they can use their capabilities, and whether suitable employment opportunities are available.

Sharma (2023) found that employers in his study considered practical and enterprising skills, proactiveness and learning aptitude important for engineering graduates and raised concerns about the extent to which existing examination and evaluation practices develop such capabilities. Kadel (2021) similarly identified concerns related to higher-order thinking, communication, and personal and social skills among a small group of pre-service teachers. These studies cannot be generalised to all graduates, but they point to a recurring issue: academic achievement and occupational competence are related but not identical. Curriculum review should therefore consider not only subject content but also teaching methods, assessment, practical learning and opportunities for students to apply knowledge. This is particularly important because occupational requirements change as technology, production processes and forms of work change.

The connection between education and workplaces is equally important. Students cannot develop all forms of occupational competence through classroom learning alone. Internships, apprenticeships, field placements, industry projects, supervised practice and other forms of work-based learning provide opportunities to apply knowledge, receive feedback and become familiar with professional expectations. Nepalese evidence supports this role. Shrestha (2024) found that hospitality students reported differences between the skills they believed were expected and the skills they believed they possessed, while off-campus internships provided hands-on learning and helped students recognise their skill gaps. Thapa (2024), through a review of work-based learning in Nepalese TVET, found that such approaches can support technical, communication, teamwork, problem-solving, leadership and entrepreneurial skills. Employer participation also matters beyond the provision of internships. Bajracharya and Paudel (2021) found that employer engagement in TVET curriculum development is important for connecting training to labour-market requirements, while Paudel et al. (2025) found that relationships between education and employment actors in Nepal's TVET system remain insufficiently developed, particularly in curriculum design, implementation and feedback. These findings suggest that industry engagement should be a continuing part of curriculum development, workplace learning and competency assessment. However, work-based learning cannot be expanded simply through formal placement requirements. It requires suitable workplaces, supervisors, clear learning objectives, assessment arrangements and institutional capacity to manage partnerships.

Moreover, international evidence on university-industry linkages similarly shows that structured engagement mechanisms, including internships, joint curriculum review and industry involvement in assessment, are associated with stronger graduate employability outcomes (Ishengoma & Vaaland, 2016; Mgaiwa, 2021).

The persistence of the gap also reflects governance, institutional capacity and access to reliable career information. Nepal's federal structure has distributed education and training responsibilities across different levels of government and institutions, which creates a need for clearer roles and stronger coordination. The problem is particularly significant in TVET because curriculum development, training provision, skills standards, employment services and employer engagement involve multiple actors. Paudel et al. (2025) identify weak coordination between education and employment actors as an important constraint on the relationship between TVET and employment. Institutional capacity creates a related challenge. Faculty and instructors need current disciplinary knowledge, practical experience and appropriate pedagogical skills if they are to provide learning that reflects contemporary occupational requirements. Giri et al. (2024) identify professional development challenges among faculty in Nepalese higher education, while Kunwar et al. (2025) report inadequate professional development, limited industry experience, insufficient knowledge of emerging technologies and weak training-needs assessment among TVET instructors. Career information is another part of this system. Students need reliable information about occupations, skills requirements, further-study options and employment prospects when choosing programmes. Without such information, choices can be influenced heavily by family expectations, perceived prestige, accessibility and assumptions about employment. Better career guidance cannot create jobs where labour demand is weak, but it can help learners make more informed decisions and help institutions understand the outcomes of their programmes.

Financing differences further contribute to the fragmented nature of the system: without a coordinated funding mechanism, TVET stakeholders in Nepal have tended to implement programmes independently of one another, which weakens the coherence of skills provision across the sector (Bhattarai et al., 2021). Systematic reviews of micro-credentials suggest that short, competency-based, verifiable qualifications can make specific skills more visible to employers and provide more flexible pathways for upskilling, although their value depends on quality assurance, accreditation and genuine employer recognition (Varadarajan et al., 2023; Gamage & Dehideniya, 2025). A pilot of an employability-skills micro-credentialing methodology across three East African universities found that embedding a competency-based e-portfolio within the curriculum improved both students' and employers' visibility of the skills graduates had actually developed (Maina et al., 2022), an approach that could complement Nepal's existing skills-testing and TVET qualifications infrastructure. Nepal's own higher-education strategic planning has begun to acknowledge these coordination challenges: the 2024-2029 strategic plan of UGC for higher education identifies governance,

quality assurance and stronger linkages with the labour market among its priority strategic pillars (UGC, 2023).

Social attitudes toward vocational education further reinforce these institutional and labour-market challenges. University degrees continue to hold strong social value in Nepal, while vocational and technical pathways can be viewed as less prestigious. Evidence from Nepal's TVET sector indicates that student interest in some technical programmes has declined and that perceptions of programme quality, labour-market opportunities and the status of vocational education can influence participation (Baral, 2024). These attitudes should not be treated as a problem of individual preference alone. They are also influenced by the quality of training, opportunities for further education, employment outcomes and the credibility of vocational qualifications. When TVET provides modern training, competent instructors, recognised qualifications, opportunities for progression and realistic routes into employment or self-employment, it has stronger grounds for gaining social confidence. The six factors discussed above therefore reinforce one another. Weak curriculum relevance can limit competence development; limited workplace exposure can restrict the application of knowledge; weak employer engagement can reduce labour-market responsiveness; fragmented governance can make coordination difficult; limited career information can contribute to poorly informed educational choices; and weak institutional capacity can prevent reforms from being implemented effectively.

Two further dimensions deserve attention even though they lie beyond the immediate scope of the empirical evidence reviewed above. Entrepreneurship education remains underdeveloped as a pathway to employment within Nepal's higher education and TVET curricula, despite growing international evidence that structured entrepreneurship education can strengthen self-employment intentions and broader employability when it is grounded in local labour-market conditions. Digital and technology-enabled approaches to skills development offer a further, potentially lower-cost route for expanding access to applied learning, particularly for institutions and provinces with limited laboratory or workshop infrastructure. Evidence from other low- and middle-income settings shows that digital-skills gaps among students and instructors, weak digital infrastructure and unclear institutional policies continue to limit the extent to which such approaches can substitute for in-person practical training (Ndibalema, 2025), while broader digital-divide research cautions that expanding access to digital skills for disadvantaged populations requires deliberate policy design rather than technology alone (James, 2021). Both entrepreneurship education and technology-enabled skills development therefore warrant closer empirical attention in future research on Nepal's credential-competence-employability gap. A further and rapidly evolving dimension is the diffusion of artificial-intelligence tools into everyday work. Employer surveys and graduate studies from other middle-income settings report growing gaps between the digital and AI-related skills employers expect and those graduates report possessing, alongside evidence that graduates who use generative-AI tools more confidently tend to report better alignment

between their studies and subsequent employment (Portocarrero Ramos et al., 2025; Tee et al., 2024; Zhou et al., 2025). These emerging developments reinforce the broader argument of this study: improving employability requires not only expanding access to education and training, but also ensuring that learning systems continuously adapt to changing occupational demands and provide learners with opportunities to develop and demonstrate relevant competencies.

Conclusion

Nepal's post-secondary education and training challenge is not simply a shortage of graduates or training provision. The central issue is the weak connection between academic credentials, demonstrated competence and productive employment. Higher education has expanded considerably, but the evidence reviewed in this study indicates that academic qualifications do not always translate into the practical, transferable and occupational capabilities required in the workplace. At the same time, the evidence shows that well-designed training, work-based learning and stronger links between education and employers can support better labour-market outcomes. The main challenge, therefore, is to strengthen the connection between what learners' study, what they can demonstrate, and the opportunities available in the labour market. This requires greater emphasis on applied learning, authentic assessment, workplace experience, employer engagement, career guidance and continuing learning across both higher education and TVET.

The findings have clear implications for key stakeholders. For government, the priority should be to strengthen coordination among higher education, TVET and labour-market institutions, improve labour-market information, and support stronger employer engagement and work-based learning. For universities, greater emphasis is needed on applied learning, authentic assessment, career guidance and stronger links with employers to ensure that academic programmes develop workplace-relevant capabilities. For TVET providers, the focus should be on maintaining occupational relevance, strengthening practical assessment and expanding workplace-based learning in response to changing labour-market needs. For employers, greater participation in curriculum development, internships, apprenticeships and other forms of work-based learning is needed to strengthen the connection between training and employment. These stakeholder-specific actions directly address the weaknesses identified in the evidence and can help strengthen the transition from education and training to productive employment in Nepal.

Ethical Statement

This study is based exclusively on publicly available secondary data and documentary sources. No human participants were involved, and no personal or identifiable information was collected or reported.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests or conflicts of interest that could have influenced the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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Reflection

Walking in Citizens' Shoes: Experiential Design Thinking in Public Sector Training

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Abstract

Public administration has recognized that citizen-centric service delivery is the heart of public service. This requires public officials to understand services from the perspective of those who use them. The capacity building initiatives are required to focus on enhancing practical capabilities to understand the needs of the service user and design services accordingly. This paper examines the Public Service Innovation (PSI) module of the Advanced Course on Management and Development (ACMD) at the Nepal Administrative Staff College (NASC) and reflects on how immersive field learning complements classroom teaching to build officials' capacity to redesign services from citizens' perspectives. My experience in redesigning and facilitating the ACMD course across multiple cohorts indicates that field immersion helped trainees better understand public service delivery by exposing them to the real experiences, frustrations, and expectations of service users. I argue that experiential learning offers a transferable pedagogical model for embedding design thinking in public sector capacity building and strengthening citizen-centric governance.

Keywords: design thinking; experiential learning; public sector training; citizen-centric services; Nepal

Introduction

The theory and practice of public administration have evolved significantly over recent decades. Traditionally, public administration focused on the internal workings of government, with an emphasis on laws, rules, formal procedures, professionalism, and administrative stability. From the late 1970s and early 1980s, the new public management perspective viewed citizens primarily as customers of public services. Later New Public Service perspective recognized the role of public officials and citizens in shaping public outcomes. Under these approaches, citizens are no longer viewed simply as customers or targets of government but as active participants who can contribute to policy development, service design and delivery (World Bank Group, 2018). Governments and schools of public

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administration have increasingly turned to public sector innovation labs and human-centred approaches to reimagine policy and service design (McGann et al., 2018). These initiatives encourage officials to understand services from users' perspectives, shifting attention from institutional processes to citizens' lived experiences.

Design thinking has emerged as a practical approach for bringing a human-centric perspective into policy and service design (Dam & Siang, 2021). It is also used in public sector training programmes. However, in many training settings, it is still mainly taught in the classroom through lectures and short exercises. The trainee officials may understand the tools but find it difficult to use them in real service settings. The challenge is not only to introduce design thinking tools, but also to create learning situations where officials can observe services, interact with users, and use what they learn from these interactions.

This challenge became visible during the redesign of the Advanced Course on Management and Development (ACMD) at the Nepal Administrative Staff College (NASC), an initiative I contributed to as a member of the course redesign team in 2022. ACMD is a flagship in-service program for mid-career public officials, designed to strengthen leadership, management, and governance competencies (NASC, 2021). Trainees are typically mid-level officials from different ministries and agencies who are expected to contribute to organizational and policy reforms. The redesigned ACMD introduced several pedagogical innovations, one of which was the Public Service Innovation (PSI) module (NASC, 2022). In this module, design thinking is embedded as an experiential learning approach rather than treated as a standalone classroom topic. The five-day PSI module combines classroom sessions with immersive fieldwork in real public service settings. This allows trainees to observe services, understand citizens' experience, identify problems, and develop ideas for improving services.

This article examines how the redesigned PSI module addresses the pedagogical challenge of integrating design thinking into public sector training. As the member of the ACMD course redesign team and also having nine years of experience facilitating PSI cohorts at NASC, I argue that immersive field experiences, supported by citizen-centric diagnostic tools such as empathy maps and customer journey maps help mid-career officials to develop a practical understanding of how to improve public service from citizens' perspective. Evidence from transport management, land administration, consular services, and tertiary healthcare shows how experiential learning can help bridge the gap between administrative process compliance and citizen-centric service delivery, while cultivating the capabilities required for public sector innovation.

Literature Review

Design Thinking in Public Administration and Policy

Governments face complex and interconnected policy challenges that cannot always be addressed through conventional bureaucratic approaches. In response, public organisations

have adopted design thinking as a human-centred approach to reframing policy problems and developing innovative public services and policies (Design Council, 2013). Unlike traditional problem-solving approaches that mainly focus on technical or administrative efficiency, design thinking emphasises empathizing users, experimentation, iterative learning, and co-creation with citizens (Lewis et al., 2020). Dorst (2011) describes design thinking as the simultaneous creation of both a solution and the system through which it functions, making it well suited to addressing complex and uncertain public problems. Design thinking has emerged as an important methodological foundation for contemporary public sector innovation.

Beyond its conceptual appeal, design thinking has been demonstrated as a practical approach across diverse organizational settings. Liedtka et al. (2013) show through a range of organizational, public-sector, and social-sector cases that design thinking can support service redesign, organisational improvement, and public problem solving. They discuss practical methods such as ethnographic research, visualisation, storytelling, and experimentation that help organisations understand users' experiences, identify new possibilities, and develop and test solutions. Their cases show that design thinking is not only a way of thinking about problems but also a practical set of tools and methods that can be applied to complex organisational and societal challenges.

Evidence from government practice also supports its relevance for the public sector. In a study of U.S. federal agencies, Liedtka et al. (2020) found that practitioners used human-centred research, iterative prototyping, and collaborative problem solving to improve policy and service design. Participants reported a better understanding of citizens, stronger cross-functional collaboration, greater organisational learning, and more user-focused decision making. At the same time, the study also identified barriers to implementation such as bureaucratic routines, organisational culture, limited leadership support, and resource constraints. These findings suggest that design thinking offers considerable potential for public sector innovation, but its successful application depends on developing the capabilities of public servants and creating organisational environments that support experimentation and learning.

Experiential Learning and Public Sector Capacity Building

The theoretical foundations of experiential learning can be traced to Dewey's idea of experience as a continuous relationship between action, thought, and interaction with the environment. Dewey (1938/1997) emphasised the principles of continuity and interaction: current experiences are shaped by previous experiences while also influencing future learning (cited in Dobos, 2014). Experiential learning therefore provides an important theoretical foundation for practice-based learning. Beard and Wilson (2006) emphasise learning through experience and the importance of designing learning activities that actively engage learners. Public officials need to understand the ground realities and know their citizen. This requires

opportunities to connect with the real-world situation, reflect on their own experience and then apply learning to workplace. Training therefore needs to create structured opportunities for trainees to examine their experiences, question existing assumptions, and apply new learning to practical situations.

Kolb's (1984) operationalised the idea of experiential learning through four interconnected stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. The cycle presents learning as an ongoing process in which individuals experience a situation, reflect on it, develop or revise conceptual understanding, and test that understanding through further action. By linking direct experience with reflective observation, conceptualisation, and active experimentation, experiential learning allows learning to be continuous and adaptive (Langa & Balkaran, 2025). Kolb and Kolb (2005) also emphasised the importance of learning environments in which participants actively engage in this cycle rather than passively receive knowledge.

These principles are relevant to public sector capacity building. Public officials are expected not only to understand administrative and policy concepts but also to apply them to complex and uncertain real-world problems. Conventional classroom-based training may provide robust conceptual knowledge but it may offer limited opportunities to test assumptions, interact with stakeholders, and understand citizens' needs. Experiential learning can help bridge this gap by connecting conceptual learning with authentic issues faced by citizen. It is therefore not simply a pedagogical technique but a way of helping public officials develop practical judgement, reflective capacity, and adaptive problem-solving skills.

These features make experiential learning relevant to public-sector capacity building. Public officials must do more than acquire administrative and policy knowledge. They need to interpret complex situations, engage with citizens, question established assumptions, and adapt their responses to local conditions. Experiential learning provides a framework to connect these activities through a cycle of experience, reflection, conceptual understanding, and action. The following section develops a conceptual framework that explains how design thinking tools can support and structure this learning process.

Conceptual Framework: Design Thinking Tools as Mediating Artefacts in Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle

Although design thinking and experiential learning are often described as complementary approaches, how they work together is not always clearly explained. The two frameworks also operate at different analytical levels. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle explains how learning develops through experience. Learners have a concrete experience, reflect on it, develop concepts from that reflection, and use those concepts to guide further action. Design thinking, in contrast, is a user-centred approach that involves empathising, defining, ideating, prototyping, and testing. In this paper, the two frameworks are not treated as parallel stages or interchangeable processes.

The present article integrates design thinking tools into Kolb's model of experiential learning. In the PSI module, design thinking tools provide practical ways for trainees to experience, record, discuss, analyse, and respond to public service problems. In this sense, the tools act as mediating artefacts between trainees' encounters with service users and the processes of reflection, analysis, and problem diagnosis. However, these tools do not automatically produce learning, nor do they guarantee that proposed solutions are representative or equitable.

The relationship between the two frameworks is therefore not seamless. Some stages are closely connected, while others only partly overlap. One important point of connection is concrete experience. In Kolb's (1984) model, concrete experience refers to a direct encounter that provides the basis for learning. In the PSI module, field immersion provides this experience. Trainees enter public service settings, observe service delivery, and interact with citizens and frontline staff. However, this experience is not completely unstructured. Before entering the field, trainees are briefed on what to observe, whom to approach, and how to record their observations. Their experience is therefore partly shaped by design thinking practices.

Field immersion provides the concrete experience, while tools such as empathy maps, journey maps, and field notes help trainees record and examine what they observe. A field visit may expose trainees to queues, delays, confusion, or difficulties faced by citizens, but exposure alone does not necessarily lead to learning. Trainees need to reflect on what they observed, question their initial assumptions, and develop better explanations of the problem. Design thinking tools can support this process by turning individual observations into material that can be discussed and examined by the group.

A similar distinction applies to active experimentation. In Kolb's model, active experimentation focuses on applying and developing understanding through action. Design thinking experimentation is more outward-facing. A proposed solution is tested with users and stakeholders to see whether it responds to their needs and works in the organisational setting. In the five-day PSI module, this form of experimentation is limited. Trainees develop a paper-based Service Innovation Plan (SIP) and consider a small set of pilot-oriented questions rather than testing a prototype in the field. This stage is therefore closer to a preparation or rehearsal for experimentation than to active experimentation in the fuller sense of Kolb's model.

Against this conceptual background, the customized framework maps design thinking tools onto the four stages of Kolb's experiential learning cycle. Field immersion provides a direct and situated experience. Empathy mapping, journey mapping, and field notes support reflective observation by helping trainees record their experiences and consider them from different perspectives. T-charts, the 5 Whys technique, root-cause analysis, and problem framing support abstract conceptualisation by helping trainees move from individual observations to broader explanations of service problems and their institutional or process-

related causes. Finally, Service Innovation Plans, pilot templates, and implementation discussions support active experimentation by giving trainees an opportunity to present, explain, and defend their proposed solutions to their peers. Other trainees question the ideas, provide feedback, and suggest alternative approaches. This allows teams to test and refine their ideas through discussion and peer feedback, creating a simulated form of experimentation within the training setting.

The contribution of this framework is not to claim that design thinking and experiential learning are perfectly aligned. Design thinking tools are not treated as a perfect match with Kolb's stages. Instead, they are treated as mediating artefacts that support different stages of the learning cycle while also bringing their own focus on user needs, enquiry, and validation. The framework shows how design thinking tools can mediate and structure experiential learning in a public-service training context. They provide practical means for trainees to engage with citizen experiences, reflect collectively, analyse service problems, and translate insights into action.

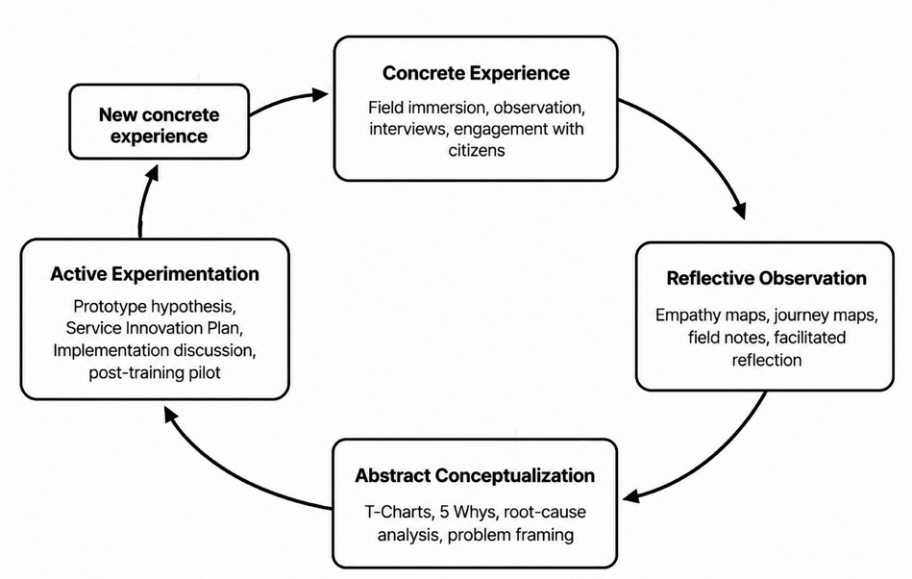

Figure 1: Integrated conceptual framework linking design-thinking practices with Kolb's experiential learning cycle in citizen-centric public-sector training.

A Critical Perspective on Citizen-Centricity

The discussion above, and the analysis that follows, use citizen-centricity as an organising concept. Citizens are not a homogeneous group. Their experiences of public services can differ based on factors such as income, gender, age, disability, location, education, language, social status, and access to information. Therefore, the views collected during a field visit may identify important service problems, but they cannot represent the needs and experiences of

all citizens. Citizen engagement can also reproduce existing inequalities when people with greater confidence, time, social status, or access to officials are more able to participate and make their views heard (Osborne & Strokosch, 2022).

Citizen-centricity involves a potential tension between improving user experience and protecting public value. Bourgon (2007) argues that a public administration must also remain responsible for democratic values, fairness, accountability, and the wider public interest. From this perspective, citizen-centred service improvements should be assessed not only by whether they make services faster, easier, or more satisfactory for immediate users, but also by whether they promote equity, legality, accountability, and long-term public value. For example, simplifying a service process for regular users may still exclude people who lack digital access, official documents, literacy, mobility, or confidence in dealing with public institutions. Public-service improvements should therefore be assessed not only in terms of the experiences of visible users, but also in terms of whether they address the needs of absent, marginalised, and structurally excluded groups (Osborne et al., 2021).

There is also a risk that citizen-centricity becomes a slogan rather than a change in administrative practice. Public organisations may use the language of empathy, participation, or co-design without changing decision-making processes, resource allocation, service rules, or accountability arrangements (Lewis et al., 2020; Osborne & Strokosch, 2022). For this reason, citizen-centricity should be treated as a practical and critical approach, rather than assuming that any activity involving citizens is automatically beneficial.

In this study, empathy maps, journey maps, T-charts, and root cause analysis are used to make trainees' observations and assumptions about citizens' experiences more explicit, structured, and open to discussion. However, these tools do not remove problems of representation, unequal power, or competing public values. Accordingly, the findings should be interpreted as evidence of changes in trainees' empathy and diagnostic reasoning. They should not be taken as proof that the resulting service-improvement proposals fully represent all citizens, are politically neutral, or are sufficient to address the needs of all citizens.

Methodology and Case Context

ACMD Course and the PSI Module

The study is situated within the ACMD at the NASC. ACMD is a flagship in-service program for mid-career public officials of government of Nepal. Trainees come from different ministries and public agencies and are involved in leading or contributing organisational and policy reforms in their respective areas.

The ACMD curriculum underwent a major redesign in mid-2022 with several new interventions introduced. One of these was the PSI module, which uses design thinking as part of an experiential learning approach. Over five consecutive days, the module combines classroom-based learning with field immersion in real-world pubic service settings. Trainees

engage directly with service environments and produce diagnostic tools and a SIP focused on a specific public service (NASC, 2022).

Author Positionality

As a faculty member at NASC, I have been involved in public sector innovation training for nearly a decade. This experience has repeatedly revealed a paradox: officers possess extensive knowledge of laws, administrative regulations, and formal reform frameworks, they often lack a grounded understanding of how citizens experience public services. Serving as a core member of the ACMD redesign team provided an opportunity to address this disconnect. The team was driven by the conviction that PSI cannot be taught as a static set of management prescriptions; but should be learned through active, empathetic, and field-based enquiry. I was involved in developing and introducing the PSI module and have since facilitated it across successive cohorts. This experience has allowed me to observe how mid-career bureaucrats step out of administrative comfort zones, sit alongside vulnerable service seekers, and rethink institutional workflows through citizens' eyes.

Data Sources

This article is a reflective qualitative case study based on structured facilitator observations and documents generated during the delivery of the PSI module. It does not aim to produce statistically representative findings or measure the causal effects of training. It examines how trainees engaged with the module, how their understanding developed through field experience and reflection, and how they identified, discussed, and refined service-improvement ideas during the five-day learning process. The analysis draws on several sources including ACMD course books from different years, PSI module guidelines, facilitator field notes, classroom discussions, field-immersion outputs, Service Innovation Plans; and reflective exercises. These materials provide evidence of how trainees understood citizen experiences, identified service problems, and developed ideas for improvement. Informal reflections and routine module feedback were also available in some cases. However, trainee self-assessment data were not collected systematically and were not available in a comparable form across all cohorts. They were therefore not treated as a separate source of evidence in this analysis. The study also draws on informal post-module discussions with facilitators who had delivered PSI sessions. These discussions focused on team participation, the quality and limitations of field visits, the use of design-thinking tools and the challenges trainees faced in turning their diagnoses into prototype or implementation plans. The author recorded key points from these discussions in reflective notes. These notes were used as a supplementary source to compare the author's observations with those of other facilitators.

Scope of the Analysis and Selection of Cases and Evidences

The analysis covers two ACMD cohorts conducted between 2025 and 2026. Each cohort had 25 mid-career public officials, with a total of 50 trainees across the two cohorts. The trainees came from different ministries and public agencies and had experience working

in different administrative settings. The unit of analysis was not the individual trainee, but the learning processes, team outputs, and common patterns observed during the PSI module. The analysis focuses on four public service areas: consular services at the Department of Consular Services in Tripureshwor; driver's licence services at the Transport Management Office in Radhe-Radhe, Bhaktapur; tertiary healthcare at the Civil Service Hospital in Minbhawan; and land administration at the Land Reform and Land Revenue Office in Lalitpur. These four service areas were selected purposively before the module was delivered. They were chosen because they involve frequent interaction between public officials and citizens and have an important effect on citizens' daily lives. The examples and quotations were selected from materials generated across the two cohorts. They are used to illustrate recurring patterns as well as differences in trainee engagement and learning, rather than to provide statistically representative findings. The analysis includes both stronger and less developed team outputs to avoid presenting only successful cases.

Reflective Analysis and Interpretation

The analysis was conducted as a practitioner reflection rather than as a formal qualitative evaluation. It was informed by the author's experience of designing, facilitating, and observing the PSI module across two ACMD cohorts. After each delivery, the author reviewed trainee notes, field-immersion materials, PSI assignments, Service Innovation Plans, classroom reflections, and available module-review and trainee-feedback materials. These materials were reviewed alongside the author's facilitator notes to identify recurring observations about how trainees engaged with citizens, used design-thinking tools, diagnosed service problems, and developed ideas for service improvement. The author also discussed the delivery of the module with other facilitators after each cohort. These discussions focused on trainees' engagement with fieldwork, the quality of team outputs, the use of empathy and diagnostic tools, and the challenges teams faced in moving from problem identification to developing and testing possible solutions. The discussions were not formal interviews, but they provided additional practitioner perspectives that helped the author reflect on and qualify personal observations.

The interpretation developed through repeated review of these materials and comparison of experiences across the two cohorts. Attention was given to patterns that appeared repeatedly, including greater attention to citizens' experiences, movement from visible service problems to possible underlying causes, and difficulties in developing feasible solutions. The analysis also considered differences between teams. Some teams used the tools mainly to describe service problems, while others developed more detailed explanations of institutional barriers and concrete proposals for change. These differences are discussed in the findings as part of the variation in learning rather than treated as exceptions. The analysis did not use a pre-defined coding framework or systematic coding of all trainee outputs, nor did it involve formal measurement of learning outcomes. The findings should therefore be understood as

an interpretive account of recurring learning patterns observed during the delivery of the PSI module, supported by trainee materials, feedback, and facilitator perspectives. They do not claim statistical representativeness or causal attribution. The author's dual role as module designer and facilitator may also have influenced what was observed and how it was interpreted. This position is acknowledged and considered further in the study limitations.

Ethical Considerations

The empirical materials used in this article were drawn from PSI reports and artefacts produced by ACMD trainees. Informed consent was obtained from trainees for the use of anonymised excerpts, diagrams, and narratives for research and publication purposes. Individual trainees, citizens, and frontline staff are not identified by name. Identifying details have been altered or omitted where necessary to protect privacy. Illustrative quotations from facilitators are also presented anonymously.

Module Architecture and Pedagogical Design

The PSI module is delivered through a compressed, contiguous five-day structure, as summarised in Table 1. The sequence moves from preparation and field immersion to analysis, presentation, peer feedback, and reflection.

Day	Phase	Core Activities	Learning Mode	Key Outputs
Day 1	Preparation	Introduction to design thinking; tool practice; fieldwork planning	Classroom	Field plan, team roles
Day 2-3	Immersion	Citizen interviews; observation; engagement with service users and frontline staff	Fieldwork	Empathy maps, journey maps, field notes
Day 4	Analysis and Synthesis	Problem framing; root cause analysis; ideation; SIP drafting	Classroom + teamwork	Problem statements, SIP
Day 5	Presentation, Peer Feedback and Reflection	Team presentations; questions and feedback; reflection	Classroom	Refined SIP; reflection and learning points

Source: PSI Module Guideline (NASC, 2022)

Day 1: Theoretical Foundation and Preparation

The module begins with a classroom session that introduces the broader context of public service and the importance of citizen-centric innovation. Trainees are introduced to the design thinking framework and practise using basic diagnostic tools to identify service delivery problems. They also review the fieldwork plan and prepare for their roles during the site visits.

Teams are formed with a mix of participants from different organisations and professional backgrounds. Within their teams, trainees clarify their responsibilities and expectations for the fieldwork and the Service Innovation Plan. Day 1 is also used to build a common understanding of citizen-centricity and introduce tools such as empathy maps, customer journey maps, T-charts, the 5 Whys, and root cause analysis. Trainees are also prepared for the field study by agreeing on basic norms for teamwork, observation, interaction with service users, and recording information.

Days 2 and 3: Immersive Fieldwork

On Days 2 and 3, trainees work in small teams and conduct fieldwork in selected public service settings. They interact directly with service users, frontline staff, and other relevant stakeholders to understand service delivery problems from different perspectives. They observe service processes and engage with people in the actual service environment to gather first-hand information.

Trainers remain involved throughout the fieldwork. They coordinate with the organisations, support teams in collecting information carefully and ethically, and remind trainees to look beyond formal procedures. Trainees are encouraged to pay attention to how people experience the service, including their concerns, difficulties, expectations, and emotions.

Day 4: Analytical Synthesis and Plan Formulation

On Day 4, teams return to the classroom to review their fieldwork findings and prepare their SIP. Trainees organise their observations, compare the views of service users and providers, identify gaps in service delivery, and develop possible user-centred solutions. Trainers guide teams in moving from raw field notes to clear problem statements and feasible ideas. They question assumptions that are not supported by field evidence and encourage trainees to be specific about the problems they identify and the changes they propose. By the end of Day 4, teams are expected to have organised their field findings into clear diagnostic outputs and a Service Innovation Plan.

Day 5: Presentation, Peer Feedback, and Reflection

On the final day, each team presents its SIP through a short PowerPoint presentation, usually with 30 minutes for the presentation and 20 minutes for questions and feedback. Other trainees and trainers question the proposed solutions, provide feedback, and suggest alternative ideas. This gives teams an opportunity to explain and defend their ideas and refine them based on the discussion.

Trainers then facilitate a reflection session in which trainees discuss what they learned from the fieldwork, how their understanding of the service problem changed, and what they learned from working with their teams and receiving feedback from others. The session helps trainees connect their field experience, analysis, and proposed solutions as part of the overall learning process.

Findings

The findings show that the PSI module did more than introduce design thinking concepts to mid-career officials. It supported three related shifts in learning. First, trainees began to view public services more from the citizens' perspective. Second, they used their field observations to develop specific problem statements and examine possible causes. Third, they developed service-improvement ideas, although their ability to develop and test these ideas varied across teams. The findings are presented in this sequence to reflect the learning process built into the PSI module.

Pedagogical Architecture as Scaffolding for Experiential Learning

The PSI module follows a compressed five-day structure that moves trainees from classroom preparation to field immersion, analysis, presentation, peer feedback, and reflection. This structure provided a clear sequence for engaging with public service problems. Across the two cohorts, I observed a repeated pattern in which trainees first encountered service problems in the field, then discussed and analysed what they had observed, and finally presented their ideas to other trainees. The sequence helped connect classroom concepts with actual service experiences.

During field immersion on Days 2 and 3, trainees were physically removed from their usual office environments and placed in busy public service settings, including the Transport Management Office in Radhe-Radhe, the Land Reform and Land Revenue Office in Lalitpur, the Department of Consular Services in Tripureshwor, and the Civil Service Hospital in Minbhawan. They encountered long queues, unclear signage, confused service users, and busy frontline staff. Some trainees later reflected that simply being present in these environments was unsettling. Several noted that they had never waited in line as a service seeker or observed how elderly applicants struggled to navigate multiple counters.

However, exposure alone did not automatically generate learning. A clear difference was observed during the Day 4 synthesis. In some teams, field notes remained descriptive like lists of procedures, counts of visitors, or general comments about "crowding" and "delays". In other teams, trainees began to connect specific observations to citizens' emotions and to institutional routines. For example, one team working on the Gynaecology OPD at Civil Service Hospital linked the early-morning rush at registration windows to pregnant women having to stand for long periods, which they had observed and recorded in their journey maps. Another team at the Land Reform and Land Revenue Office connected the physical separation of counters for different stages of land transfer to the confusion and dependence on intermediaries that they had heard from elderly applicants.

The final-day presentations also showed differences in the depth of field engagement. Teams that had spent more time talking with citizens and frontline staff generally developed more specific proposals, such as resequencing service steps, improving signage, providing support for vulnerable users, or adjusting appointment windows. Teams that relied more on

administrative information or brief observations tended to make broader recommendations such as "digitise the system" or "improve coordination." These differences suggest that the sequence of field exposure, analysis, and discussion helped trainees move from general observations towards grounded ideas, but the quality of this learning varied across teams. The five-day structure created a clear pathway from experience to reflection, analysis, and action. The structure itself did not guarantee learning, but it provided a common process through which trainees could examine public services from the perspective of citizens and develop responses to the problems they observed.

Empathy Building and Citizen Perspective

A major contribution of the PSI module was the shift in how trainees viewed service problems. At the beginning of the module, some trainees described problems in familiar administrative terms, such as "citizens come late," "citizens do not read the notices," "they do not bring the right documents," or "queues are long but unavoidable." Field immersion provided an opportunity to examine these assumptions through direct interaction with service users. Trainees were asked to record what citizens said, did, thought, and felt and to trace their experiences across different stages of a service. Empathy maps and customer journey maps helped organise these observations and made some of the practical and emotional difficulties faced by service users visible.

Empathy maps were useful in this regard. At the Land Reform and Land Revenue Office in Lalitpur, trainees initially focused on the number of counters and the complexity of land-transfer procedures. After speaking with service users and preparing empathy maps, their attention shifted towards confusion, anxiety, and dependence on intermediaries among some users, including elderly citizens, women, and people with limited literacy. One trainee reflected, "Before the field visit, we thought the main problem was crowd and insufficient number of service providers. But after talking to people, we understood that the crowd was not only because of high demand but because of confusion. Many do not know where to begin, what documents they need, or whom they can ask for help." Another trainee noted that "for a first-time visitor, every counter looks like a maze, and they become dependent on others even for simple information." These reflections show a shift from viewing the problem mainly as an administrative inefficiency to understanding it as a citizen experience. Trainees began to consider how the design of the service itself could create confusion and dependence.

A similar shift occurred at the Civil Service Hospital in Minbhawan. Trainees shadowing patients in the Gynaecology OPD began by mapping the sequence of registration, consultation, and diagnostic steps. As they added information about what patients experienced at each stage, their focus moved from simply recording that "patients wait long" to considering how long waits, crowded spaces, and uncertainty affected patients. The empathy map (Figure 1) recorded what patients said, did, thought, and felt, while the journey map (Figure 2) traced

their movement through the service and identified points where waiting and confusion increased.

The team also recognised an important limitation. The poor patient experience could not be explained only by the layout, communication practices, or queuing arrangements. Trainees observed that patient demand was high in relation to the available staff, equipment, consultation space, and time. They considered that clearer information, improved patient guidance, or changes to the queue could reduce some confusion, but would not remove the underlying capacity problem. They therefore identified the need for additional staff, equipment, and broader capacity planning. These changes were beyond the authority of the trainees and could not be tested within the short PSI exercise. This case shows that empathy and journey mapping can help trainees understand the human effects of resource constraints, but they cannot by themselves address wider organisational or resource problems.

Customer journey mapping also helped trainees see how several small problems could add up to a significant burden for service users. Trainees traced every touchpoint of the service and recorded waiting, movement between counters, repeated visits, unclear instructions, and inconsistent information. These observations helped turn general concerns about "service delivery challenges" into specific experiences faced by citizens.

T-charts, 5 Whys, and root cause analysis then helped trainees move from empathy to critical perspective. By juxtaposing citizen expectations with actual service delivery, and by repeatedly asking "why", teams began to reframe problems. Complaints about "public negligence" gave way to questions about fragmented counters, unclear standards, and limited support for first-time users. In this way, the tools helped some teams move from explanations based mainly on citizen behaviour towards examining the design and organisation of the service. These tools did not create empathy on their own. Rather, they gave trainees a structured way to record, discuss, and examine what they encountered in the field.

Diagnostic Reasoning and Problem Framing

The fieldwork helped trainees see services from the citizens' perspective, but the next challenge was to turn these observations into specific problems that could be examined and addressed. A key finding was that citizen-centric tools, combined with facilitated reflection, helped some teams move from initial reactions to more structured explanations of service problems.

At the Land Revenue and Land Revenue Office in Lalitpur, empathy maps and journey maps initially helped trainees see how elderly citizens, women, and illiterate applicants experienced confusion and dependence on intermediaries. In the diagnostic phase, however, teams went further. Using T-charts and 5 Whys, they traced these experiences back to specific design and process failures: fragmented counters for different stages of land

transfer, absence of clear instructions for first-time users, and lack of dedicated support for vulnerable applicants. The problem was no longer framed as "citizens don't understand the process" but as "the process is not designed to be navigable by people with limited literacy or social capital". This reframing was important. It shifted the locus of the problem from citizen behaviour to the design of the service.

A similar pattern was observed at the Civil Service Hospital in Minbhawan. After mapping patient journeys in the Gynaecology OPD, trainees used root cause analysis and the 5 Whys to examine the reasons behind long waiting times. This helped them turn the general concern of "long waits" into specific and testable problems. Two main problems were identified: long morning queues caused by poorly coordinated registration times, and a delay of up to three days between the first doctor consultation and the ultrasound appointment. These problems could be linked to operational issues such as the number of registration windows, appointment scheduling, and the availability of ultrasound machines. The trainees' proposals reflected this greater precision. Instead of suggesting "better patient management," they proposed specific changes such as setting time slots for follow-up visits and keeping one ultrasound machine available for the Gynecology OPD.

Across the cases, the tools helped some teams move from broad statements such as "services are slow" or "people are unhappy" towards problem statements linked to specific service processes. This shift was not automatic. In some teams, early problem statements remained broad, such as "coordination is weak" or "digitisation is needed." During the Day 4 discussions, trainers questioned these statements and asked teams to identify the specific step causing the problem, whose action or decision was involved, and what evidence supported the claim. Through this process, some teams developed more specific and actionable problem statements.

The use of qualitative narratives further strengthened diagnostic reasoning. The experience of service seekers at the Department of Consular Services or at the Transport Management Office in Radhe-Radhe were not treated as isolated anecdotes. Instead, trainees used them as entry points for systematic analysis. For example, a female service seeker in her thirties sought attestation of her marital status certificate for international visa processing. Her repeated visits at Department of Consular Services due to non-standardised formats and clerical errors pointed to underlying issues of document standardisation, verification workflows, and accountability for mistakes. Similarly, the story of young graduate from a remote district sought a driving license. Her journey revealed multiple failure points: unclear procedural information, fragmented counters, rigid deadlines that did not account for institutional disruptions, and limited recourse for affected citizens. By mapping these narratives onto journey maps and root cause diagrams, teams identified recurring patterns such as unclear procedures, repeated visits, inconsistent information, and the time and financial costs of navigating government offices. Thus, the module's second major contribution was to help trainees develop diagnostic reasoning capabilities. The tools and facilitated discussions

helped trainees move from citizen experiences to more specific explanations of service problems and their possible causes. However, the depth of this reasoning varied across teams.

From Ideation to the Limits of Prototyping

The third major finding is that the PSI module was more effective in developing empathy and diagnostic reasoning than in developing trainees' ability to prototype and test solutions. During the ideation stage, teams developed ideas that were generally linked to the problems they had identified. These included resequencing service steps to reduce waiting, creating dedicated spaces for vulnerable users, adjusting appointment windows, and standardising document requirements. These proposals were specific and citizen-focused than broad recommendations such as "digitise the system" or "improve coordination."

However, ideation should not be treated as the same as experimentation. On Days 4 and 5, teams were asked to explain their proposed solutions, present them to their peers, and respond to questions and feedback. Other trainees challenged the ideas, suggested alternatives, and raised questions about their feasibility. This gave teams an opportunity to test and refine their thinking within the training setting. The level of development varied considerably. Some teams were able to explain what would change, who would be involved, and what could be observed if the idea were tried. Other teams remained at the level of broad recommendations, such as "expand digital services" or "improve coordination between agencies," without clearly specifying the problem, user group, responsible unit, or way of assessing whether the proposed change would work.

This distinction is important for understanding the relationship between the PSI module and Kolb's concept of active experimentation. In Kolb's (1984) model, active experimentation involves using an emerging understanding to guide action and generate a new experience. In design thinking, experimentation generally involves developing a sufficiently concrete idea, testing it, learning from the result, and revising it. In the PSI module, trainees did not field-test their proposed solutions. Instead, the SIP and the final presentation created an opportunity for teams to present, defend, question, and refine their ideas through peer discussion. The process therefore represents a simulated or preparatory form of experimentation rather than full active experimentation through implementation.

The uneven development of prototyping and experimentation was also related to the structure of the module. Five days provided enough time for trainees to encounter citizen experiences, reflect on them, identify problems, and develop initial solutions. However, the time was limited for developing more advanced skills in pilot design, risk assessment, stakeholder negotiation, and testing. The module therefore provided an initial opportunity to practise these activities rather than develop full competence in them. There were also indications that organisational conditions may affect how easily such ideas could be tested beyond the training setting. During debriefs, trainees and facilitators discussed issues such as limited

decision-making authority, organisational procedures, resource constraints, and concerns about trying untested approaches. These observations were not systematically collected as evidence of organisational culture. They are therefore treated here as possible contextual factors about all public organisations.

These findings suggest that the PSI module is best understood as a starting point that builds readiness for innovation than as a complete innovation-implementation programme. . It provides trainees with opportunities to engage with citizens, examine service problems, develop possible solutions, and test their ideas through peer discussion. The module is stronger in building empathy and diagnostic reasoning than in developing advanced prototyping and experimentation skills. Training alone, however, cannot create the organisational and political conditions needed for experimentation, such as time, decision-making authority, access to data, supervisory support, and acceptance of learning from unsuccessful attempts. This is consistent with the transfer-of-training literature, which treats transfer as dependent not only on what is learned during training but also on conditions in the work environment that support generalisation and maintenance of learning (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Burke & Baldwin, 1999). For the PSI model, this implies the need to the value of further opportunities for trainees to practise testing and refining solutions, particularly where organisational conditions allow such experimentation.

Discussion: Facilitation Insights and Pedagogical Guidelines

Facilitation Insights

The findings show that the PSI module provided strong opportunities for concrete experience and reflective observation, but was less consistent in supporting active experimentation. This section discusses why these differences appeared across teams, drawing on facilitators' observations and post-module discussions. A comparison across the two cohorts suggests that the five-day structure was important, but the structure alone was not enough to create citizen-centric learning. Differences in team engagement appeared to be associated with how tasks were framed, how fieldwork was supported, and how teams were guided during the synthesis on Day 4. These insights, recorded in the author's reflective notes, help explain some of the patterns observed.

Facilitators consistently emphasised the importance of Day 1 in setting the direction for the entire module. When fieldwork was introduced mainly as an exercise to "collect organisational information," teams tended to focus on organisational structures, process flows, and legal mandates. In contrast, when facilitators clearly framed the task around understanding citizens' experiences, teams gave greater attention to interviews and observations of service users. As one facilitator noted, "If you don't push them on Day 1 to talk to citizens, they will spend two days talking only to officers." Another reflected that the way the field task is introduced on Day 1 "almost decides whether they will come back with stories or with organograms." This helps explain why some teams produced richer empathy maps and journey narratives than others.

Ongoing support during the field days also appeared to influence the depth of citizen engagement. Several facilitators described holding short online check-ins with teams while they were in the field. They asked teams to share their initial observations, checked whom they had spoken to, and encouraged them to include people who might otherwise be overlooked, such as first-time or less confident service users. One facilitator recalled, "When I ask, 'Who have you not talked to yet?', they often realise they have only spoken to the most confident people in the queue. Then they go and find someone who is struggling." These check-ins helped teams maintain focused on lived experience, especially when they had collected a large amount of information.

Day 4 was seen by facilitators as an important stage of the learning process. Trainees returned from the field with large amounts of information such as field notes, maps, and stories. They then had to bring this information together and identify the main problem. Facilitators described this as one of the more difficult phases of the module. As one facilitator explained, "They come back with so much data. The challenge is not giving them more tools, but helping them let go of some things and focus. That convergence is hard, but it is where the real learning happens." Teams that received stronger support in moving from "everything is a problem" to "this is our core problem" tended to produce sharp problem statements. This suggests that facilitation during synthesis is not simply about managing the activity; it is also an important part of the learning process.

Facilitators also observed moments when trainees began to connect citizens' experiences with their own lives. These moments were seen as signs of a change in perspective. During presentations or reflection sessions, some trainees made comments such as, "When I sat with that elderly woman, I remembered my mother." One facilitator reflected that in such moments, "it is no longer about 'citizens' as an abstract category. It is about someone's mother, someone's child." Similar comments appeared in several debrief discussions. These observations support the empathy-related findings and suggest that field engagement helped some trainees see citizens not only as a mere service seeker but as people with individual experiences and challenges.

Taken together, these observations suggest that facilitation is not a peripheral support function. It is a central part of the learning process. The same five-day structure can either reinforce routine bureaucratic thinking or help trainees question it. Much depends on how facilitator frame the work on Day 1, check-in with teams during fieldwork, and support them in making sense of their findings on Day 4. These observations provide the basis for the pedagogical guidelines presented in the next section.

Pedagogical Guidelines for Public Sector Trainers

The PSI experience offers five practical lessons for trainers, curriculum designers, and public administration educators who want to use experiential and citizen-centric approaches in public sector training. The experience suggests that design thinking should not be taught

only as a set of separate tools. Instead, it should be part of a connected learning process that links theory, fieldwork, reflection, and action.

First, connect theory with fieldwork from the beginning. In the PSI module, classroom discussions on design thinking gave trainees a way to understand what they encountered in the field. Concepts such as citizen-centricity became more meaningful when trainees could connect them with situations such as long queues, confusion, and the difficulties experienced by service users. Therefore, key concepts should be introduced just before trainees go into the field. This helps them apply what they have learned immediately to real service experiences and makes the connection between theory and practice clearer.

Second, use structured outputs, not just stories. Fieldwork should produce clear and organised evidence rather than only personal impressions. Tools such as empathy maps, customer journey maps, and root cause analysis help trainees record, compare, and make sense of what they observe. These tools also provide a common basis for teams to move from individual observations to shared understanding of a service problem.

Third, encourage different perspectives and reflection. Trainees should be encouraged to look at a problem from the perspectives of citizens, frontline staff, and managers. This can help them understand that service delivery problems are not always caused by one person or unit but it may arise from several parts of a system. Reflection sessions are important because they give trainees time to question their assumptions, make sense of what they observed in the field, and connect these experiences with wider administrative and policy issues.

Fourth, scaffold experimentation, not only problem identification. Training should not stop when a problem has been identified. Trainees should also have opportunities to develop and test their ideas. Simple pilot templates can help them think about what would change, for whom, where, and how the proposed change could be assessed. Even when an actual pilot cannot be conducted during the training, asking trainees to explain, defend, and refine their ideas through peer discussion can provide a useful form of simulated experimentation. This can help them move beyond broad recommendations towards more specific and realistic solutions.

Finally, trainers should act as facilitators and co-learners. Trainers need to remain involved during fieldwork and provide timely support on data collection, fieldwork outputs, and problem framing. At the same time, they should remain open and curious about what trainees discover in the field. This can create a learning environment in which trainees feel comfortable asking questions, challenging assumptions, working with others, and trying new ideas.

These lessons suggest that experiential and citizen-centric training involves more than adding field visits or design-thinking tools to an existing curriculum. It requires a learning design that connects concepts, field evidence, reflection, analysis, and action. When supported by active facilitation, this approach can help public officials question routine ways of understanding service problems and develop more citizen-centric approaches to public service delivery.

Conclusion and Implications

This reflective case study examined how the PSI module of the ACMD at the NASC combines experiential learning with design-thinking practices to develop citizen-centric capacities among mid-career public officials. The findings suggest that a carefully structured learning process can help trainees move beyond an administrative understanding of service delivery and develop an understanding of how citizens experience public services. Field immersion was important in this process. By observing service settings, speaking with service users and frontline staff, and documenting citizen journeys, trainees identified practical challenges such as confusing procedures, long waiting times, unclear information, emotional stress, dependence on intermediaries, and barriers faced by elderly people, women, first-time service users, and people with limited literacy or access to information. These experiences would have been difficult to understand fully through classroom discussion, official presentations, or administrative reports alone. The contribution of the PSI module lies not only in the use of design-thinking tools but also in placing these tools within a structured experiential learning process. Field immersion provided trainees with direct experience of public service delivery. Empathy maps, customer journey maps, and facilitated reflection helped trainees examine citizens' experiences more carefully. T-charts, the 5 Whys technique, and root-cause analysis then helped them move from general descriptions of problems, such as crowding, delays, and weak coordination, towards specific explanations of the institutional, procedural, and organisational factors contributing to these problems.

The findings also show that the PSI module was stronger in developing empathy and diagnostic reasoning than in developing trainees' capacity to prototype and test service innovations. Within the five-day module, the SIP functioned mainly as a structured learning output and an evidence-informed proposal rather than as evidence of completed experimentation. This does not reduce the value of the module; rather, it clarifies its purpose and limits. Because trainees examine services delivered by institutions other than their own, they may not have the authority or opportunity to implement the specific proposals developed during the module. The PSI module is therefore better understood as an initial platform for citizen-centric innovation. It helps trainees learn how to identify service problems from citizens' perspectives, develop evidence-based problem statements, and formulate feasible improvement options. The expected transfer is not necessarily the implementation of the same SIP, but the later application of these methods and perspectives to service challenges within trainees' own organisations.

The study has several implications for public-sector training.

First, training programmes that seek to develop citizen-centric capacities should give greater importance to carefully planned field immersion. Fieldwork should not be treated as an additional exposure visit. It should be connected closely with classroom concepts, structured observation, reflection, and analysis.

Second, field immersion should generate structured learning outputs rather than only general impressions. Empathy maps, customer journey maps, field notes, T-charts, and root-cause analysis can help trainees document observations, compare perspectives, and connect citizens' experiences with service design and organisational problems. These tools also provide a common basis for discussion among trainees and facilitators.

Third, innovation training should support trainees in moving from problem identification towards feasible action. Even when trainees cannot implement the SIP developed during the module, they can be encouraged to identify possible next steps, consider who would be responsible, identify likely implementation barriers, and explain how a proposed change could be assessed. This gives trainees an opportunity to practise implementation-oriented thinking without suggesting that the training itself has produced a tested innovation.

Finally, the transfer of learning needs attention after trainees return to their own organisations. Since trainees may not be able to implement the SIPs which they prepared for a host institution, post-training support should focus on helping them apply citizen-centric methods to problems within their own areas of responsibility. This could include mentoring, opportunities to discuss service challenges with supervisors and colleagues, links with reform or innovation units, and resources for exploring feasible improvements. Such mechanisms can help trainees carry the perspectives and methods developed during PSI into their own work, rather than leaving them as learning activities confined to the training programme.

Limitations of the Reflective Case Study

This article has several limitations. First, it is a reflective practice account written by a module designer and facilitator. The author's close involvement provided direct access to the learning process, but it may also have influenced the interpretation of trainees' engagement and module outcomes. Second, the analysis did not use a pre-defined coding framework, representative sampling of trainee outputs, or an independent evaluator. Therefore, the findings cannot establish a causal effect of the PSI module and cannot be generalised to all public-sector training contexts. Third, the study did not use a standardised trainee self-assessment instrument before and after the module. Although informal reflections and routine feedback were available in some instances, these materials were not collected consistently across the two cohorts. They therefore could not support a systematic comparison of perceived learning outcomes. The study does not claim to have measured changes in

trainees' attitudes, skills, or workplace behaviour. In addition, because teams studied services delivered by institutions other than their own, this study could not assess whether the SIPs were subsequently adopted, tested, or implemented by the organisations that hosted the field visits. Future research should use an anonymous, standardised self-assessment instrument before and after the module. It should also include follow-up surveys or interviews after trainees return to their organisations. Such a design could examine changes in perceived empathy, diagnostic reasoning, confidence in prototyping, and readiness to develop citizen-centric service improvements. It could also examine whether organisational support after training influences the transfer and sustained application of learning.

Data Availability Statement

The data and materials used in this study were generated during the delivery of the PSI module of the ACMD. They include facilitator field notes, trainee fieldwork outputs, Service Innovation Plans, classroom reflections, and related course and module documents. Due to privacy and confidentiality considerations, individual-level trainee materials and identifiable information are not publicly available. Anonymised materials may be made available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to appropriate permissions.

Ethical Statement

The empirical materials used in this article were drawn from PSI reports and artefacts produced by ACMD trainees. Informed consent was obtained from trainees for the use of anonymised excerpts, diagrams, and narratives for research and publication purposes. Individual trainees, citizens, and frontline staff are not identified by name. Identifying details have been altered or omitted where necessary to protect privacy. Illustrative quotations from facilitators are also presented anonymously.

Declaration of Interest

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Declaration of Generative AI Use

The author used ChatGPT to improve the language, grammar, and readability of the manuscript. After using the AI tool, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content, analysis, interpretation, and conclusions presented in the published article.

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Annex: Figures

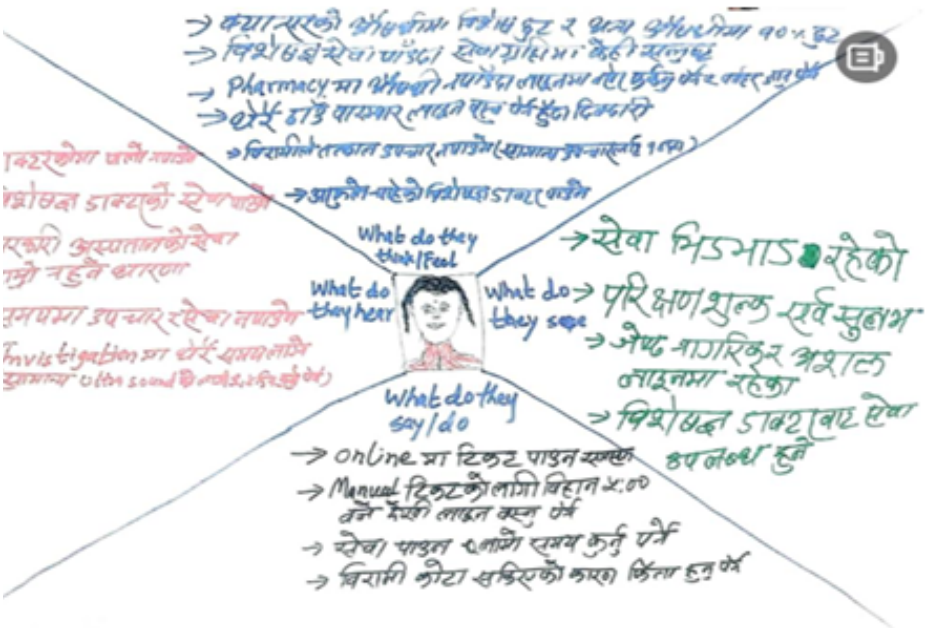

Figure 1. Empathy map of patients attending the Gynaecology OPD.

Note: The map organises trainees' field observations of Gynaecology OPD patients under what patients say, do, think, and feel. This captures the emotional and cognitive burden of the visit that is not captured in procedural process charts.

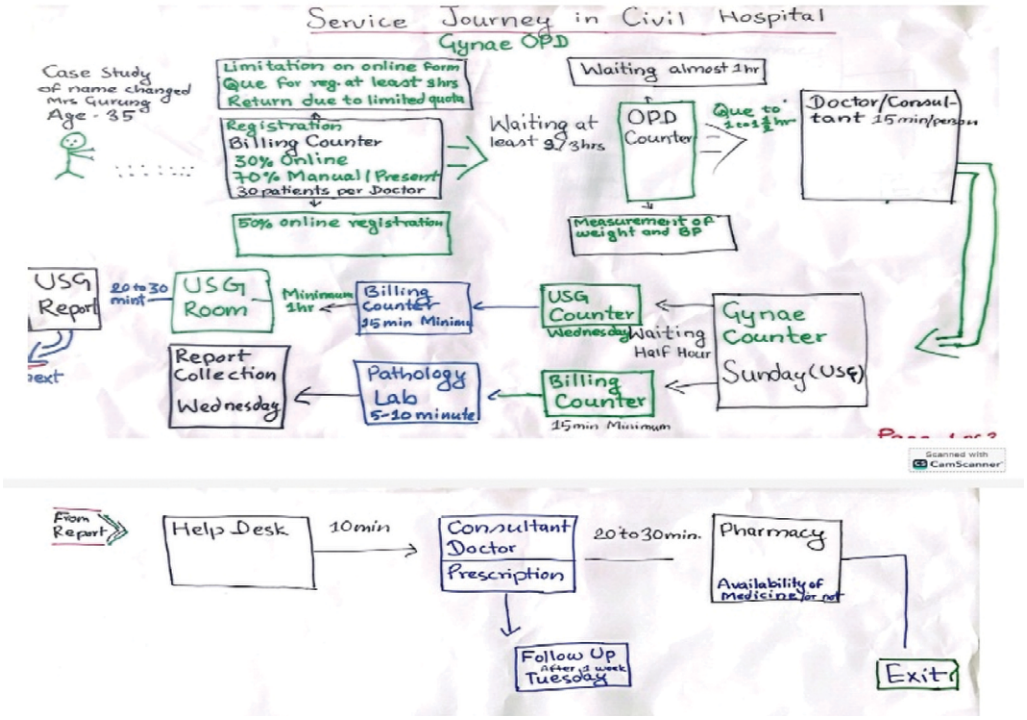

Figure 2. Patient journey map for the Gynaecology OPD

Note. The map plots each touchpoint from registration to discharge against waiting time and patient sentiment, showing where delay and disorientation were concentrated across the visit.

Reflection

Effective Training Management in the Public Sector: Experiences from the Public Financial Management Module

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Abstract

Public Financial Management (PFM) plays an important role in strengthening public sector governance and requires continuous capacity development for civil servants. Although considerable attention has been given to curriculum design and instructional methods, less attention has been paid to the practical management of training programmes. This paper examines the coordination of the Public Financial Management Module at the Nepal Administrative Staff College (NASC) through a reflective practice approach. It draws on practical experience from coordinating 30 training cohorts across fiscal years 2081/82 and 2082/83 to examine the responsibilities of module coordinators across the stages of programme planning, implementation, and post-training evaluation. The analysis identifies several recurring challenges, including limited internal faculty capacity, dependence on external resource persons, last-minute scheduling changes, and limited time for practical learning. The paper also highlights practical measures that may strengthen training management, including improved planning, broader faculty development, stronger coordination mechanisms, and greater emphasis on learner-centred approaches. Although the reflections are based on the experience of a single institution, the findings offer practical insights for public sector training organizations seeking to improve programme delivery and strengthen institutional capacity.

Keywords: Adult learning; Capacity development; Module coordination; Public financial management; Public sector training

Introduction

Public Financial Management (PFM) is central to effective public governance because it determines how governments raise, allocate, and use public resources to achieve policy objectives (Allen et al., 2013). An effective PFM system supports fiscal discipline, allocates resources according to government priorities, and improves the efficiency, transparency, and accountability of public expenditure (Cangiano et al., 2013). Although PFM has traditionally

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been associated with accounting and finance professionals, the growing complexity of public administration requires all public officials to possess a basic understanding of financial management. Decisions on procurement, budgeting, programme implementation, inventory management, and contract administration all have financial consequences. Public organizations therefore need to strengthen the PFM knowledge and skills of civil servants across administrative and technical functions.

Training is one of the main approaches used to strengthen these competencies. Public sector training institutions invest substantial resources in curriculum development, learning materials, expert facilitators, and participant support. Research on training effectiveness has mainly examined instructional design, learning methods, trainee characteristics, and the transfer of learning to the workplace (Noe, 2020; Salas et al., 2012). Comparatively little attention has been given to the practical management of training programmes. Activities such as programme planning, coordination with resource persons, scheduling, communication with participants, logistical arrangements, and the management of unexpected issues receive limited attention in the literature, despite their importance for successful programme delivery (Kraiger et al., 1993; Noe, 2020; Salas et al., 2012).

Effective training management requires continuous coordination before, during, and after programme delivery. Delays in scheduling, inadequate communication, limited availability of facilitators, or logistical problems can reduce the quality of the learning experience, even when the curriculum is well designed. These responsibilities are usually undertaken by training or module coordinators, yet their contribution has received limited scholarly attention, particularly in the context of public sector capacity development.

This paper addresses this gap by examining the management of the PFM Module at the NASC. It draws on practical experience from coordinating 30 cohorts of the programme across fiscal years 2081/82 and 2082/83 to examine the administrative processes, coordination challenges, and management practices that support effective training delivery. The paper also identifies lessons that may strengthen training management in NASC and other public sector training institutions. By documenting these experiences, it contributes to the limited literature on the practical management of public sector training programmes.

Contextual Background: The PFM Module at NASC

NASC is the statutory national institution responsible for strengthening the professional capacity of civil servants in Nepal (NASC, 1982). Operating through its Centre for Financial Management (CFM), NASC delivers the PFM Module as part of several training programmes, including the Professional Course on Management and Development (PCMD) and the Basic Administration Training (BAT) (NASC, 2022, 2025). The module introduces government officials to the principles and practices of PFM and supports the effective implementation of financial regulations across the public sector. Understanding the structure and delivery of this module provides the context for examining the training management practices discussed in this paper.

The module is designed primarily for civil servants from federal, provincial, and local governments. Participants come from diverse ministries, departments, and public agencies and have different educational and professional backgrounds (NASC, 2022). Most are administrative officers rather than finance specialists. Even so, their routine responsibilities include budget implementation, public procurement, inventory management, financial reporting, and compliance with public financial regulations. The module therefore aims to develop a practical understanding of PFM rather than technical expertise in government accounting. It introduces the legal framework, financial procedures, and management principles that support informed administrative decision-making and responsible use of public resources.

The curriculum covers the major components of Nepal's PFM system. Topics include the macroeconomic and fiscal framework, budget execution, public procurement, inventory management, internal financial control, and government accounting. Participants also receive practical exposure to the main digital systems used in public financial management, including the Computerized Government Accounting System (CGAS), the Sub-National Treasury Regulatory Application (SuTRA), and the Public Asset Management System (PAMS) (NASC, 2022). This combination of policy, legal, and operational content makes the module technically demanding, particularly for participants who have limited prior knowledge of financial management.

The module adopts an adult learning approach that combines presentations, case studies, practical examples, group discussion, and experience sharing. Resource persons are drawn from government ministries, oversight agencies, and other public institutions that have direct responsibility for financial management. Their practical experience helps participants relate statutory provisions and financial procedures to their own administrative responsibilities.

Delivering the module requires careful coordination because the curriculum is extensive, the time available is limited, and many sessions depend on the availability of external resource persons. Participants also expect opportunities for practical exercises and discussion, particularly during sessions on digital financial management systems. These demands require continuous planning, communication, scheduling, and logistical coordination throughout the programme. This operational context forms the basis for the experiences and lessons presented in the following sections.

Approach to Reflection

This paper adopts a reflective practice approach to examine the management and delivery of the PFM Module at NASC. Reflective practice is not only a means of professional learning but also an established form of qualitative inquiry through which practitioner-researchers critically examine their experiences and generate practice-based knowledge (Schon & DeSanctis, 1986). It provides a useful link between theoretical understanding and the realities of programme administration by bringing tacit knowledge gained through

practice into a more explicit and systematic form. The reflections presented in this paper draw on our direct experience of coordinating 30 cohorts of the PFM Module during fiscal years 2081/82 and 2082/83. Rather than evaluating participants' learning outcomes, the analysis focuses on the managerial and administrative dimensions of programme delivery. It considers key aspects of implementation, including programme planning, coordination and communication with resource persons, participant management, scheduling, logistical arrangements, and the practical challenges encountered during implementation and the ways in which these challenges were addressed.

The reflections draw on three sources of information. The first consists of records and notes prepared during the planning, delivery, and completion of each training programme. The second includes participant evaluation forms and informal feedback collected at the end of each module. The third comprises administrative documents such as programme schedules, correspondence with resource persons, and records of timetable revisions. These sources provide complementary perspectives on the coordination process and help identify issues that recurred across different training cohorts. This process identified common challenges, recurring coordination tasks, and practical strategies that contributed to effective programme delivery. The purpose of the analysis is not to produce generalizable findings but to document practice-based knowledge that may inform training management in NASC and other public sector training institutions.

The Anatomy of Module Coordination

Our experience of coordinating the PFM Module indicates that effective training depends on much more than classroom instruction. Although facilitators are responsible for delivering course content, successful programme delivery also depends on careful planning, coordination, and administrative support. These responsibilities are usually undertaken by the module coordinator, who connects participants, resource persons, support units, and programme management throughout the training process. Previous studies have also recognized that effective training requires both sound instructional design and strong administrative support (Noe, 2020; Salas et al., 2012).

Module coordination is a continuous process that begins before the programme starts and continues after the final session. Based on our experience, the coordinator's responsibilities can be grouped into three stages: pre-training preparation, programme delivery, and post-training follow-up. Each stage requires close communication, timely decision-making, and effective coordination among multiple stakeholders.

Pre-training: Planning and Preparation

Preparation begins once the annual training calendar and programme schedule have been approved. The first task is to develop a detailed timetable that allocates topics, sessions, facilitators, and supporting resources. This process requires careful planning because the PFM Module covers a wide range of specialized subjects, including public procurement,

government accounting, internal financial control, and digital financial management systems such as the Computerised Government Accounting System (CGAS), the Sub-National Treasury Regulatory Application (SuTRA), and the Public Asset Management System (PAMS). Each topic requires resource persons who possess relevant technical knowledge and practical experience.

The next stage involves confirming the availability of facilitators. Internal faculty members and external experts often have demanding professional responsibilities, and their availability may change at short notice. Module coordinators therefore maintain regular communication through official correspondence, email, and telephone. Session objectives, participant profiles, programme schedules, and administrative information are shared in advance so that facilitators understand both the learning objectives and the needs of participants. Early communication also reduces the likelihood of scheduling conflicts and last-minute changes. Effective preparation also depends on close coordination across different units of NASC. Administrative, finance, logistics, and information technology staff each contribute to programme delivery.Technical preparation is particularly important for sessions that demonstrate digital financial management systems because software demonstrations require reliable equipment and stable internet connectivity. Experiences across the 30 cohorts demonstrated that pre-training coordination extends far beyond routine administration. For instance, in earlier cohorts, late confirmation of external resource persons frequently forced last-minute timetable revisions during training execution. To mitigate this recurring issue, the coordination team introduced a standardized advance-briefing protocol and established back-up facilitator rosters two weeks prior to module launch. Reflecting on these iterations highlights that effective pre-training management relies on proactive risk-mitigation strategies and inter-departmental synergy, which significantly reduce downstream operational.

During Training: Execution and Adaptability

Once the training programme begins, the coordinator's role shifts from preparation to implementation. The focus moves from planning activities to maintaining the smooth delivery of each training session. Although facilitators lead the learning process, effective programme delivery depends on continuous coordination throughout the training period.

Each training day begins with a review of programme readiness. This includes confirming the attendance of scheduled resource persons, checking that training rooms are prepared, verifying that presentation materials and handouts are available, and resolving any administrative issues from the previous day. The coordinator also monitors the timetable throughout the day to keep sessions on schedule. This task is particularly important in adult learning programmes because discussions often extend beyond the planned time, especially when participants relate course content to their own professional experience.

The coordinator also maintains regular communication with participants, facilitators, and

institutional support units. Facilitators may require technical or administrative assistance before or during their sessions, while participants may seek clarification on programme arrangements or learning activities. Responding promptly to these requests helps maintain an organised learning environment and allows facilitators to concentrate on teaching.

Adaptability is an essential aspect of effective module coordination. Even after careful preparation, unexpected situations may arise during programme delivery. External resource persons may become unavailable at short notice because of official commitments. Technical problems may interrupt demonstrations of digital PFM systems such as the Electronic Government Procurement (e-GP) System, CGAS, PAMS or SuTRA. In these situations, both course coordinator and module coordinator must assess the available options and respond promptly. Typical responses include coordinating with information technology staff, adjusting the training schedule, rearranging the sequence of sessions, or identifying alternative learning activities until the problem is resolved.

These experiences demonstrate that successful programme delivery depends on continuous monitoring and timely decision-making throughout the training process. A frequent disruption occurred during digital PFM demonstrations (such as e-GP and CGAS), where sudden server down-times or internet latency stalled scheduled practical exercises. In response, resource person established pre-configured offline simulation environments and reorganized schedules to run parallel group exercises while technical glitches were resolved. These experiences proved that operational success relies not just on adherence to timetables, but on real-time adaptive management and ready contingency protocols. Flexibility, effective communication, and prompt responses to operational challenges help maintain the quality of the learning experience despite unavoidable disruptions.

Post-training: Evaluation and Documentation

Module coordination continues after the final training session. The post-training stage focuses on evaluation, documentation, and the identification of lessons that can improve future programme delivery. These activities support quality improvement and institutional learning. Participant feedback is collected through structured evaluation forms and informal discussions at the end of the programme. The evaluation covers the relevance of the course content, the effectiveness of facilitation, the usefulness of practical exercises, and participants' views on programme organization. Although participant feedback does not provide a complete measure of training effectiveness, it offers valuable information on the quality of programme delivery and identifies areas that require improvement. Repeated feedback across different training cohorts also helps distinguish recurring issues from isolated concerns. The post-training stage also includes administrative completion of the programme. Coordinators compile attendance records, programme schedules, facilitator information, financial documents, and other administrative records required by the institution. A programme completion report summarises the main activities, identifies operational issues encountered during delivery, and records actions taken to address them.

These records support institutional accountability and provide useful reference material for future programmes.

An equally important outcome of this stage is organizational learning. Reviewing participant feedback alongside administrative records allows coordinators to identify practical lessons for future training programmes. For example, repeated requests for additional practice sessions on digital financial management systems may justify changes to the training schedule or curriculum. Experience from previous programmes also informs decisions on facilitator selection, session sequencing, logistical planning, and participant support. Recording these lessons in a systematic manner allows future coordinators to build on previous experience rather than repeating the same challenges. Our experience indicates that post-training evaluation is not simply the final administrative requirement of a training programme. It serves as the primary bridge between routine administrative closure and strategic organizational learning. It is an important part of continuous improvement because it provides evidence that supports better planning, more effective coordination, and higher-quality programme delivery in subsequent training cycles.

Operational Challenges in Training Delivery

Coordinating the PFM Module involves a range of operational challenges that influence programme planning and delivery. Although many of these issues are common in public sector training, they have particular significance for technical programmes that depend on specialized expertise and close coordination among multiple stakeholders. Reflecting on these challenges helps identify practical measures that can strengthen future training management.

Faculty Constraints: Limited Internal Capacity and Dependence on External Resource Persons

One of the main challenges in delivering the PFM Module is the limited availability of internal faculty members who specialize in public financial management. The curriculum covers a broad range of technical topics, including public procurement, government accounting, internal financial control, and digital financial management systems. Delivering these subjects requires facilitators who possess both technical expertise and practical experience. The demand for internal faculty often exceeds their availability. NASC regularly conducts several training programmes at the same time, and faculty members are frequently assigned to more than one programme. As a result, it is not always possible to allocate internal specialists to every PFM session. Programme coordinators therefore rely extensively on external resource persons from government ministries, oversight agencies, and other public institutions. The participation of external experts strengthens the quality of the module because they contribute current policy knowledge and practical experience from government organizations. Their involvement also helps participants relate financial regulations and administrative procedures to workplace practice. Similar findings have

been reported in studies of adult learning, which emphasize the value of practitioners who connect theory with professional experience (Knowles et al., 2015).

At the same time, dependence on external resource persons creates severe coordination challenges. Most experts have demanding responsibilities in their own organizations, and training commitments must compete with official duties. Changes in government schedules, urgent institutional assignments, and overlapping requests from different training providers may result in cancellations or requests to reschedule sessions at short notice. These circumstances require frequent communication, continuous revision of programme schedules, and careful coordination to minimize disruption to the training programme. Our experience suggests that this challenge reflects a structural issue rather than an isolated operational problem. Although external experts remain essential for delivering specialized content, heavy dependence on a limited pool of facilitators increases uncertainty in programme management. Expanding internal faculty capacity, maintaining a wider network of qualified resource persons, and strengthening advance scheduling arrangements may reduce this risk and improve the continuity of programme delivery.

Logistical Vulnerabilities: Last-minute Cancellations and Scheduling Conflicts

One of the most frequent operational challenges in coordinating the PFM Module is managing last-minute changes to the training schedule. This issue is closely linked to the programme's reliance on external resource persons, whose official responsibilities may take priority over training commitments. Meetings, field visits, urgent administrative assignments, and policy-related responsibilities can result in cancellations or requests to reschedule sessions at short notice. These unexpected changes affect several aspects of programme delivery. Module Coordinators may need to identify an alternative facilitator, revise the timetable, inform participants of the changes, and coordinate revised logistical arrangements within a limited period. The impact is greater when the cancelled session covers a specialized topic because suitable replacements may not be readily available. Delays in one session may also affect the sequence of later sessions and reduce the time available for discussion or practical exercises. Responding effectively to these situations requires advance planning as well as timely decision-making. Maintaining a list of potential resource persons, preparing flexible programme schedules, and maintaining regular communication with facilitators before each session can reduce the impact of unexpected changes. Close coordination among faculty members, administrative staff, and information technology personnel also helps programmes continue with minimal disruption. Our experience indicates that last-minute scheduling changes cannot always be avoided. However, their effect on programme delivery can be reduced through careful preparation, clear communication, and well-defined contingency arrangements. These measures improve the resilience of training management and help maintain the continuity of learning despite unavoidable changes.

Pedagogical Challenges: Technical Expertise, Facilitation Skills, and Time for Practical Learning

In addition to administrative and logistical issues, the delivery of the PFM Module presents important pedagogical challenges. Our experience identifies two recurring issues: differences in facilitators' instructional approaches and the limited time available for practical learning.

The PFM Module relies extensively on external resource persons because of their specialized knowledge and practical experience. Their contribution enriches the programme by providing current examples from PFM practice. However, technical expertise does not necessarily translate into effective facilitation. Adult learning theory suggests that adult learners benefit from active participation, discussion, problem-solving, and opportunities to relate new knowledge to their own professional experience (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2015). Some facilitators naturally adopt these approaches, while others rely mainly on lecture-based presentations. When interaction is limited, participants have fewer opportunities to discuss practical issues, ask questions, and apply new knowledge to workplace situations.

A second challenge relates to the balance between curriculum content and the time available for learning. The PFM Module covers a wide range of technical topics within a limited training period. As a result, facilitators often face pressure to complete the planned content, which reduces the time available for practical exercises and discussion. End-of-module evaluations collected across the 30 cohorts (representing over 800 participants) showed that over 75% of participants explicitly requested expanded hands-on time for case studies and digital system application.

This issue is particularly evident in sessions on digital PFM systems, including the e-GP System, CGAS, the SuTRA, and PAMS. Although participants recognize the importance of these applications in their daily work, many indicate that the allocated time is insufficient to develop confidence in their practical use. Extending opportunities for supervised practice would help participants translate conceptual understanding into workplace skills. These observations suggest that effective training management requires attention not only to programme administration but also to the quality of the learning process. Careful selection and preparation of facilitators, together with realistic curriculum planning that allows sufficient time for practical application, can improve participant engagement and strengthen learning outcomes.

Strategic Framework and Key Lessons for Effective Module Coordination

Drawing from the synthesis of experiences across 30 training cohorts, effective module coordination can be structured into an integrated 3P Framework (Preparation, Adaptability in Performance, and Post-Evaluation Integration): Systemic Advance Planning (Preparation): Establishing dual-tier resource person rosters and pre-training technical checks to minimize logistical vulnerabilities. Adaptive Contingency Execution (Performance): Maintaining active co-facilitation and real-time IT troubleshooting to safeguard pedagogical delivery

against unavoidable disruptions. Continuous Feedback-to-Practice Loop (Post-Evaluation Integration): Utilizing structured participant feedback to dynamically adjust subsequent course designs and session allocations. Institutionalizing this framework enhances training resilience, reduces administrative friction, and ensures high-quality public financial management training delivery.

Conclusion

The paper concludes that effective training management depends not only on the quality of instruction but also on systematic planning, continuous coordination, timely communication, and post-training evaluation. The analysis identified recurring challenges, including limited internal faculty capacity, dependence on external resource persons, last-minute scheduling changes, and the need to balance extensive technical content with adequate opportunities for practical learning. These experiences suggest that strengthening internal faculty capacity, expanding the pool of qualified resource persons, improving programme planning, and providing greater support for learner-centered facilitation can improve training delivery. Although this paper reflects the experience of a single institution, the lessons are relevant to other public sector training organizations that deliver specialized capacity development programmes. Effective training management creates the conditions for meaningful learning and supports the development of a competent and accountable public service.

Ethical Statement

This paper is based on reflective practice and routine programme records. No identifiable personal information is reported, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

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Declaration of Generative AI Use

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used the ChatGPT large language model to assist with copy-editing the text for improved clarity, grammar, and readability. Following this process, the authors thoroughly reviewed and revised the content as necessary. The author(s) affirm full responsibility for the final content of the published article.

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Experience

Building Capacity for Federal Governance: Lessons from Four Years at the Provincial Research and Training Centre, Madhesh Province, Nepal

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Abstract

Nepal's 2015 Constitution established a three-level federal system comprising the federal, provincial, and local levels of government. The transition created significant capacity challenges, particularly at the provincial and local levels, where institutional capacity, human resources, and intergovernmental coordination remained limited. This paper examines capacity development at the Provincial Research and Training Centre, Janakpur, based on my experience as the Executive Director. It examines three linked cases: institutional self-assessment and technical competency development; leadership and inclusion among elected representatives; and behavioural capacity development among government employees. The cases show that capacity development requires more than training events. Institutional learning, political participation, and behavioural change require different approaches, timeframes, and forms of follow-up. The paper suggests that future capacity development should connect training with institutional learning, practical application, sustained engagement, and longer-term assessment of change.

Keywords: capacity development; federalism; local governance; Madhesh Province; public administration; Nepal

Introduction

The Constitution of Nepal (2015) established a three-level system of government comprising federal, provincial, and local governments. It also transferred important powers and responsibilities to the provincial and local levels. However, the formal transfer of authority did not automatically provide the capacity needed to exercise those powers effectively. When I assumed the position of Executive Director at the Provincial Research and Training Centre (PRTC), Janakpur, in Madhesh Province, I found an institutional setting with significant opportunities but also serious capacity constraints. The first local elections held after the promulgation of the Constitution brought many elected representatives

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into local government who were committed to their new responsibilities but had limited experience in local governance. The Local Government Operation Act 2017 and other key legal provisions were not readily accessible or sufficiently understood by many officials and elected representatives responsible for local governance.

Four related challenges were particularly evident at the outset. First, local governments faced gaps in the legal and policy framework needed to guide their work. Second, many elected representatives had limited capacity to interpret and apply existing laws and policies. Third, local governments faced serious shortages of qualified human resources. Fourth, relations among government institutions were weak at both horizontal and vertical levels. These conditions limited the ability of local governments to exercise their responsibilities under federalism and provide effective public services.

This paper presents three case studies from PRTC's work under the Provincial and Local Governance Strengthening Programme (PLGSP). The cases examine three areas of capacity development: institutional self-assessment and technical competence, capacity development among elected representatives, and changes in bureaucratic behaviour. The cases draw on practical experiences from these activities and examine what worked, what did not, and what challenges remained unresolved. The cases also provide insight into PRTC's own institutional development. Through these experiences, PRTC gradually moved beyond its initial focus on organising training events and developed a broader approach to supporting continuous learning within provincial and local government.

Method, Sources, and Scope

This paper uses a reflective practitioner case study approach based on work at the Provincial Research and Training Centre (PRTC), Janakpur. Factual information, including dates, locations, participant numbers, and documented participant feedback, comes from PRTC's internal programme and annual reports, event records, symposium programmes, and social media documentation of major training activities. Information on the selection of approaches, internal discussions that informed decisions, responses to implementation challenges, and lessons from the programmes comes from my work as Executive Director. The reflection also considers what could have been done differently and how these experiences contributed to the development of PRTC's approach to capacity development. The paper is not an independently verified empirical evaluation. It focuses on institution building, capacity development, and changes in bureaucratic behaviour within PRTC during a particular period. Claims about what worked, what did not work, and the reasons for these outcomes are based on direct professional experience and should be understood within this context. The findings relate to a particular institution, programme, and period and are not intended to provide a general assessment of PLGSP, PRTC, or capacity development practice. Where external data or research are used to provide context, the relevant sources are identified. Other reflections and judgements are based on direct experience and professional judgement.

Case Study 1: Institutional Capacity Building

Situation

When I became Executive Director in January 2022, institutional self-assessment among local governments in Madhesh Province was limited. Most municipalities had no systematic process for assessing their administrative, financial, or service-delivery capacity. Local governments were more accustomed to external audits and assessments by federal ministries, the Office of the Auditor General, and development partners than to examining their own institutional strengths and weaknesses. The idea of conducting an internal assessment and using its findings for institutional improvement had gained little acceptance.

The federal government required all 753 local governments to complete the Local Government Institutional Capacity Self-Assessment (LISA), later replaced by the Local Governance Performance Assessment System (LGPAS), and the Fiduciary Risk Assessment (FRA) each year by the end of Poush (mid-January). However, compliance was uneven, and the assessments were often treated as administrative requirements rather than opportunities for institutional learning. From my experience, this raised a broader concern. Without a clear understanding of their institutional gaps, local governments would find it difficult to identify appropriate capacity-building priorities. Self-assessment therefore became an important starting point for PRTC's support to local governments.

A related challenge was the limited technical capacity of the permanent workforce. Federalism had expanded the responsibilities of local governments faster than many institutions could develop the systems and skills needed to manage those responsibilities. A municipality could identify a weakness through self-assessment but still lack the personnel and technical expertise needed to address it. Gaps in areas such as procurement, records management, public financial management, information technology, and environmental compliance often required practical technical support beyond the assessment process itself.

Objective

The objective was to encourage local governments to move beyond external compliance towards regular internal assessment and improvement. PRTC sought to help municipalities use LISA and FRA as diagnostic tools to identify institutional gaps, set priorities, and develop practical improvement plans. The aim was not simply to complete the required assessment forms but to make the findings useful for local decision-making and institutional development.

A second objective was to strengthen the functional competencies needed to address the gaps identified through self-assessment. These included procurement, public financial management, information technology, environmental compliance, gender-responsive planning, and local economic development. Linking assessment with practical capacity development was important because identifying a gap had limited value if local governments lacked the skills to address it. Together, these efforts were intended to strengthen the

institutional capacity required for local governments to exercise their responsibilities under federalism.

Approach

PRTC, in coordination with District Coordination Committees, organised Review and Orientation Programmes on LISA (LGPAS) and FRA for all 136 local governments. The programmes were delivered through cluster-level workshops across four pairs of adjoining districts: Saptari-Siraha, Dhanusha-Mahottari, Sarlahi-Rautahat, and Bara-Parsa. This arrangement reduced travel requirements and allowed participants to discuss issues relevant to their local contexts. The three-day programme brought together IT Officers, Planning and Finance chiefs, and DCC officials for the first two days. Participants conducted a SWOT analysis of LISA and FRA implementation and identified key institutional gaps. Chief Administrative Officers joined on the third day to review the findings and discuss possible areas for improvement.

The approach placed emphasis on self-assessment rather than external evaluation. PRTC developed this approach in line with PLGSP's emphasis on institutional ownership. The purpose was to encourage local governments to view LISA and FRA as tools for identifying institutional strengths and weaknesses rather than as exercises conducted only to meet reporting requirements.

PRTC also developed a parallel programme of functional training based on the gaps identified through LISA and FRA. The training covered procurement, information technology, public financial management, building codes, environmental assessment, Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI), Gender-Responsive Budgeting, and Local Economic Development (LED), along with LISA, FRA, and later LGPAS. The training was linked to practical challenges identified by local governments. For example, district-based training for GESI focal persons in Rautahat, Sarlahi, Dhanusha, Mahottari, Siraha, and Saptari introduced a GESI perspective to local government planning and activities. Participants developed institutional action plans to support GESI mainstreaming. IT Officers from Siraha and Saptari received training in networking, server administration, and containerisation using Docker. LED training combined basic concepts with market analysis and local economic issues and resulted in practical planning outputs for participating municipalities. This approach linked institutional assessment with specific skills and actions needed to address identified gaps.

Implementation Challenges

Resistance to self-assessment was immediate and took several forms. Some Chief Administrative Officers viewed the process with suspicion because of concerns that information about institutional weaknesses could be used by provincial or federal authorities to influence resource allocation or increase oversight. During one discussion, a Chief Administrative Officer asked whether reporting institutional gaps honestly could affect future grant decisions. Such concerns reflected a broader lack of trust in how assessment

findings might be used. PRTC therefore had to clarify that the purpose of the process was institutional improvement rather than external scrutiny.

Engagement also varied across municipalities. Some local governments, particularly those with staff who had greater familiarity with administrative and technical systems, participated actively and showed interest in using the findings for improvement. Others approached the process mainly as a formal requirement. Limited documentation created another practical difficulty. In several local governments, incomplete records made it difficult to assess existing capacity accurately. Weak financial records, limited information systems, and incomplete institutional documentation restricted the quality of self-assessment and, in some cases, made it difficult to identify the underlying causes of institutional gaps.

Technical capacity presented a related challenge. The gaps identified through self-assessment were rarely isolated. Local governments were expected to plan, procure, manage public finances, maintain information systems, and respond to diverse community needs, often with a small number of staff responsible for several functions. The same staff members frequently had to participate in training across multiple areas while continuing to manage their regular responsibilities. This created a practical limit on how quickly new skills could be developed and applied within local governments.

Response to the Challenges

PRTC made three adjustments to address the challenges associated with self-assessment. First, the process was framed as confidential and non-punitive. I communicated directly with Chief Administrative Officers that PRTC would use LISA findings for diagnosis and institutional improvement, not for disciplinary purposes. Second, the initial exercise was simplified so that municipalities could begin by identifying what they knew about their institutional situation, even where supporting documentation was incomplete. Third, the cluster workshops brought together municipalities with different levels of institutional capacity. This created opportunities for peer learning and allowed participants to compare experiences and practical solutions.

PRTC also revised its approach to functional training. Each training programme was linked to a practical question: what should participants be able to do differently after the training, and how could that change contribute to better local governance? Training was therefore linked more closely to the gaps identified through LISA and FRA. The process created a continuous cycle in which assessment identified areas for improvement, training developed relevant skills, and subsequent assessment provided an opportunity to review further needs.

Building trust was an important part of this process. The non-punitive approach required direct engagement with Chief Administrative Officers and DCC officials, and in some cases more than one discussion was necessary before concerns about the use of assessment findings were reduced. As confidence in the process increased, participants became more

willing to discuss institutional weaknesses and share practical experiences with colleagues from other municipalities. This helped create a stronger basis for peer learning and more targeted functional training.

Outcomes and Evidence

The LISA and FRA orientation programmes reached all 136 local governments in Madhesh Province. Beyond participation, there were early signs of changes in how some municipalities used the assessment process. Several municipalities began referring to LISA findings during annual planning. Some also requested follow-up technical support to address specific gaps, particularly in procurement and revenue mobilisation. A further indication of institutional ownership was the initiation of internal LISA review meetings by some municipalities without direct prompting from PRTC. Quantitative evidence of longer-term impact remains limited, so these observations should be treated as early indications rather than evidence of sustained institutional change. From my experience, however, the growing use of assessment findings and requests for targeted support suggested greater willingness among some local governments to identify and address their own institutional gaps.

The functional competency programmes produced more tangible outputs. GESI focal persons from six districts developed institutional action plans for GESI mainstreaming. IT Officers in Siraha and Saptari reported applying skills gained through the training to local information systems and service delivery. LED training also resulted in locally developed recommendations on economic development priorities rather than ending with classroom-based discussion. These outputs provided practical evidence that the training was connected to institutional needs identified by local governments.

Reflection and Lessons

This case suggests that institutional self-assessment can provide an important foundation for capacity development. Local governments need a clear understanding of their institutional strengths and gaps before they can set meaningful capacity-building priorities. The experience also showed that assessment is more useful when it is connected to planning, technical support, and follow-up action rather than treated as a separate reporting exercise.

If I were advising the next Executive Director, I would recommend introducing the process earlier in the fiscal year, linking LGPAS, LISA, FRA, and LED-related assessments more closely to the annual planning cycle, and strengthening the analytical skills of planning officers. The aim would be to help planning staff use assessment findings for decision-making rather than treating the process as a compliance exercise. The experience also suggests that local governments need both broad orientation and specialised technical support. Broad orientation is useful when institutions are developing basic systems and procedures, while more established institutions require specialised skills within their own workforce.

Case Study 2: Transformative Leadership and Inclusion

Situation

The 2017 and 2022 local elections increased the representation of women, Dalits, and other marginalised communities in local government, in line with the constitutional provisions on inclusive representation. However, representation did not always lead to meaningful participation in decision-making. I identified the capacity needs of elected representatives as a distinct area of work because these representatives had entered local government through elections and had different learning needs from career administrative staff. Many had limited knowledge of the legal and institutional arrangements that governed local government. Understanding the Constitution, the Local Government Operation Act (LGOA), and related legal provisions was directly relevant to their ability to exercise their roles, participate in meetings, make decisions, and contribute to planning and budgeting.

Strengthening intergovernmental relations (IGR) was also important. Federalism depends not only on the constitutional division of powers but also on effective relationships among the three levels of government and among local governments. PRTC therefore used the three Cs of coordination, cooperation, and collaboration as a practical framework for helping local governments understand and manage horizontal and vertical relationships with other government institutions.

PRTC also observed that women elected representatives, particularly those from Dalit and other marginalised communities, did not always have equal access to decision-making spaces. Some women members of executive bodies had limited opportunities to participate in executive meetings, limited knowledge of their legal roles and rights, and limited involvement in planning and budgeting. These concerns were also raised in discussions with development partners and other organisations working on local governance and inclusion. Later interaction programmes provided further evidence of this issue. Among 27 Deputy Mayors and Vice-Chairs who participated in two programmes, 26 were women, representing Dalit, Janajati, Madhesi, and other communities. Participants reported that coordination with external partners often focused on Mayors and Chairs, while Deputy Mayors and Vice-Chairs had less access to information, budget-related discussions, and planning and budgeting processes.

These experiences led to a broader understanding of capacity development within PRTC. The challenge was not limited to knowledge and technical skills. Confidence, voice, institutional position, and access to decision-making spaces also affected the ability of elected representatives to exercise their roles. Capacity development therefore needed to address both individual capability and the institutional conditions in which that capability was exercised.

Objective

The objective was to strengthen three areas of capacity among elected representatives: knowledge of the federal structure and local government mandates, confidence to participate and assert their roles in formal decision-making processes, and practical skills to translate constitutional rights and responsibilities into local policies, plans, and budgets. PRTC also sought to strengthen intergovernmental relations by connecting elected representatives with provincial networks, creating opportunities to exchange experiences across municipalities, and sharing practical approaches to local governance and inclusion.

Approach

PRTC conducted Transformative Leadership training for elected Executive Committee members across all eight districts, organising the programmes in clusters of two adjoining districts. Particular attention was given to women and representatives from Dalit and other marginalised communities. The training used participatory methods, including games, role-plays, group exercises, and flipcharts, rather than relying mainly on lectures and text-heavy presentations. This approach developed from experience during the first training cycle, when some participants, particularly those with limited formal education, found projector-based presentations difficult to follow. PRTC therefore adapted the training methods to make the sessions more accessible and encourage greater participation. The content covered transformative leadership, gender equality, local governance, public speaking, and the roles and responsibilities of women, Dalit, and other marginalised representatives. The experience showed that the choice of training methods was important for ensuring meaningful participation among representatives with different educational and professional backgrounds.

The participant composition reflected PRTC's deliberate focus on women and marginalised representatives. The programmes included 132 women and 22 men. This distribution resulted from targeted outreach and participant selection designed to increase the participation of groups that had historically had fewer opportunities for leadership development.

Following the 2022 local elections, PRTC expanded this approach through a province-wide learning and sharing platform. A Mega Learning and Sharing Workshop was organised in Bardibas for newly elected Mayors and Deputy Mayors from all 136 local governments. The workshop brought together senior government officials, former political leaders, a former Speaker, and experienced elected representatives as resource persons. Re-elected Mayors provided practical perspectives from their first term, including experiences of institutional development, administrative challenges, capacity gaps, and coordination with other levels of government. These exchanges provided newly elected representatives with practical lessons from local government experience. The workshop also covered the LGOA and procurement processes and provided an opportunity for newly elected municipal leaders to discuss provincial development priorities directly with the Chief Minister, Lal Babu Raut.

Implementation Challenges

Participants identified several barriers that were consistent with observations from the training programmes. Some women representatives reported limited access to executive committee meetings and decision-making processes. In some cases, representatives reported that they had not been invited to executive meetings for several months despite holding elected positions. Literacy barriers also made conventional training materials difficult for some participants to use. The design of targeted training created another challenge. Some male and senior representatives questioned the decision to provide separate or targeted training for women and marginalised representatives and viewed the approach as suggesting that certain groups lacked adequate capacity.

Participants also raised concerns about the timing and composition of the training. Many suggested that leadership training should take place soon after local elections, when newly elected representatives begin their responsibilities. Several participants also recommended that Mayors and Chairs, Deputy Mayors and Vice-Chairs, and Ward Chairs participate in the same training. This feedback challenged PRTC's initial approach of providing targeted capacity development for marginalised representatives and raised a broader question about whether inclusion would be better supported through separate targeted programmes, joint training, or a combination of both.

Response to the Challenges

PRTC revised the training methodology during the initial implementation cycle. PowerPoint-based presentations were reduced and replaced with interactive games, role-plays, visual materials, and group exercises. The change was based on observations of participant engagement and the difficulties some participants experienced with text-heavy materials and language issues.

PRTC also adopted a combination of targeted and joint training. Transformative Leadership sessions continued to focus on women and marginalised representatives, creating opportunities for participants to discuss their experiences and challenges in a supportive setting. At the same time, PRTC introduced Executive Committee Orientation sessions for all members, including Mayors and Chairs, Deputy Mayors and Vice-Chairs, and Ward Chairs. These sessions addressed common institutional responsibilities and the functioning of executive committees as a whole.

This experience led PRTC to view targeted training as a corrective measure rather than a permanent form of separate capacity development. Targeted programmes could provide space for groups with limited participation to develop knowledge and confidence, but broader institutional change required engagement from the full executive committee. The later Bardibas workshop reflected this broader approach by bringing newly elected municipal leaders together to discuss common governance challenges, institutional roles, and relationships across levels of government.

Outcomes and Evidence

The initial Transformative Leadership programmes reached 154 participants, including 132 women and 22 men. The programmes generated several indications of change in participants' confidence and participation in local decision-making. Some women representatives reported becoming more active in municipal meetings and raising questions about budgets and programmes that did not adequately address gender-related needs. One Dalit woman representative from a rural municipality used the knowledge gained through the training to advocate for a separate budget allocation for menstrual hygiene management in her ward. She later reported that the allocation was approved. This example is particularly significant because she had previously reported limited access to municipal meetings and decision-making processes.

Participants also reported greater confidence in public speaking and a clearer understanding of their roles within local government. Some reported speaking in formal meetings for the first time. Programmes for women Deputy Mayors and Vice-Chairs generated recommendations related to judicial committees and inclusive budgeting. These outputs provided evidence that the training extended beyond individual knowledge and included practical engagement with local governance responsibilities.

The Bardibas workshop produced a different form of outcome. The programme brought newly elected and re-elected municipal leaders into a common learning forum, creating an opportunity to share experiences from the first elected term of local government under federalism. Re-elected Mayors discussed the institutional, administrative, and coordination challenges they had encountered during their first term, enabling newly elected representatives to draw on experiences that might otherwise have remained confined to individual municipalities. The workshop therefore provided a mechanism for transferring practical knowledge and institutional experience between successive cohorts of elected representatives.

Reflection and Lessons

The experience showed that capacity development for elected representatives differs in important ways from training for civil servants. Civil servants enter public service through a professional system and develop within established administrative roles. Elected representatives enter local government through elections and must learn about legal responsibilities, institutional processes, leadership, and community expectations at the same time. Their capacity development therefore needs to go beyond the transfer of information. It needs to strengthen legal knowledge, confidence, leadership skills, and the ability to connect community concerns with local decisions.

The experience also supported targeted capacity development for women, Dalit, and other marginalised representatives because these groups faced specific barriers to participation and decision-making. At the same time, the experience raised concerns about relying on

separate training for too long. In retrospect, targeted programmes could have been followed more quickly by integrated sessions involving the full executive committee. This sequence would have combined individual support with broader institutional engagement and reduced the risk of treating inclusion as the responsibility of marginalised representatives alone.

The broader lesson is that capacity development in federal Nepal needs to address both individual capability and the institutional environment in which elected representatives exercise authority. Strengthening knowledge and confidence can help representatives participate more effectively, but sustained inclusion also depends on access to information, decision-making spaces, and supportive institutional practices. The experience at PRTC therefore led towards a broader approach that combined targeted support with institution-wide learning and dialogue. The Bardibas platform was an important expression of this approach because it brought different groups of elected representatives together around shared governance responsibilities and practical experience.

Case Study 3: Behavioural Capacity Enhancement of Government Employees

Situation

PRTC became aware of inconsistent application of registration procedures through citizen complaints, routine monitoring, and internal review. Ward Chairs and Secretaries responsible for birth and marriage registration, citizenship recommendations, and social security enrolment were applying procedures differently across cases. Some cases were straightforward, while others involved children of underage marriages, mismatches in citizenship documents, or unclear residency claims. Such cases required staff to interpret the relevant rules and exercise judgement, but practice was not always consistent.

The experience suggested that the problem could not be explained by a lack of technical knowledge alone. In some cases, staff appeared to understand the relevant procedures but were uncertain about how to handle complex or ambiguous cases. Concerns about accountability, reliance on familiar procedures, and attitudes towards applicants from marginalised groups could also affect decisions. These observations reinforced a broader lesson from PRTC's work: capacity development needs to address not only technical knowledge and administrative skills but also how public officials exercise judgement, interact with citizens, and understand their responsibilities.

Objective

The objective was to improve how frontline staff handled cases that required judgement and the application of rules to specific circumstances. Technical training can explain registration procedures, but it does not necessarily prepare staff to respond consistently when cases fall outside routine situations. PRTC therefore designed sessions around real and difficult cases rather than relying only on abstract explanations of procedures. The sessions also addressed concerns about accountability and encouraged staff to examine how their attitudes and decisions could affect citizens.

This approach was later extended to PRTC's 30-working-day In-Service Training for ninth- and tenth-level officers of Madhesh Province. Behavioural capacity development became an important component of the programme, reflecting the broader view that effective public administration depends not only on what officials know but also on how they apply that knowledge in practice.

Approach

At the frontline level, PRTC used real cases rather than abstract procedural explanations. Training sessions examined cases involving children of underage marriages, mismatches between citizenship and registration documents, and applicants without fixed addresses. This approach reflected PLGSP's emphasis on experiential learning and allowed staff to discuss how rules should be applied in situations that did not fit routine procedures. The sessions also addressed staff concerns about handling difficult cases, including fears that documenting or deciding on complex cases could lead to audits, blame, or legal consequences.

At the senior-officer level, PRTC applied the same behavioural approach through a 30-working-day In-Service Training programme for ninth- and tenth-level officers of Madhesh Province. The programme ran from Saun 19 to Bhadra 23, 2082 and was designed as a sustained learning experience rather than a short classroom course. It combined classroom sessions with reflection, organisational visits, policy dialogue, experiential learning, participant presentations, and direct engagement with social and community issues. According to PRTC's institutional records, this was the first provincial-level in-service programme of this duration for officers at the under-secretary or equivalent level in Madhesh Province. The programme drew on the broader tradition of advanced in-service training associated with the Nepal Administrative Staff College while adapting the approach to the provincial context.

Leadership, integrity, and personal effectiveness were central themes in the programme. Sessions on leadership and integrity encouraged participants to consider the relationship between personal conduct, institutional credibility, and public trust. Other sessions focused on engaging people, building effective teams, and developing a form of leadership that extended beyond formal position and authority.

The programme also placed substantial emphasis on understanding citizens' experiences. Participants visited vulnerable communities across the eight districts of Madhesh Province, including Natuwa/Gypsy, Musahar, Chamar, Dom-Dushadh, and Muslim communities. These visits exposed participants to socioeconomic constraints, exclusion, and barriers to public services. The experience encouraged participants to consider how administrative decisions affect communities that face greater difficulty accessing government services. A session with former Chief Minister Lal Babu Raut also examined the social, cultural, and economic barriers faced by Dalits, Muslims, women, and other marginalised groups and linked these issues to the responsibilities of public officials.

Organisational learning was another important component. During the session titled "Leading Strategically: Organisational Visit," participants visited institutions including the Office of the Chief Minister and Council of Ministers, the Provincial Hospital, Janakpurdham Sub-Metropolitan City, and a private healthcare institution. They examined institutional strengths and weaknesses, identified opportunities and challenges, and proposed measures for improvement. The visits required participants to observe, ask questions, analyse institutional practices, and develop practical recommendations rather than receive information passively.

The programme also included sessions on personal well-being, stress management, compassion, and professional responsibility. These sessions reflected PRTC's view that effective public service depends not only on technical and managerial competence but also on the ability to maintain resilience, empathy, and a sense of responsibility towards citizens.

Policy engagement was integrated throughout the programme. Sessions addressed public policy innovation, intergovernmental relations, procurement management, and electronic government procurement. The intergovernmental relations sessions brought together senior provincial officials and representatives from relevant institutions to discuss coordination across levels of government. This reinforced the practical understanding of intergovernmental relations that PRTC was also promoting among elected representatives.

In the later stages, participants moved from receiving knowledge to producing and presenting their own analysis. A symposium on health tourism was followed by participant presentations on provincial revenue, foreign employment, the relationship between the budget and periodic plans, and food security. Senior officials discussed the papers, while a comparative presentation on federalism and service delivery in the Netherlands provided an international perspective. The programme concluded with an outdoor session on public-service innovation at the Sagarnath Forest Development Project in Sarlahi. These activities required participants to apply what they had learned through analysis, presentation, discussion, and problem-solving.

Implementation Challenges

At the frontline level, some of the difficulty arose from genuine legal and procedural ambiguity. Certain cases did not fit clearly within existing procedures, leaving staff to make decisions when legal provisions or administrative guidance were unclear. Staff also faced pressure from applicants who expected immediate decisions. In some cases, there appeared to be reluctance to document difficult cases because written records could later attract scrutiny. The gender composition of frontline positions was another concern. Many of these roles were held by men, which raised questions about how cases involving women and girls were understood and handled, particularly when the cases involved sensitive personal or social circumstances.

At the senior-officer level, the main challenge was sustaining the purpose of an intensive 30-working-day programme. A programme of this length involved a risk that activities

could become ceremonial or that academic discussions could become disconnected from the practical conditions officers faced in their workplaces. Organising field visits across eight districts, institutional visits, policy discussions, and participation from senior officials and external resource persons required substantial coordination. The experience also raised questions about the feasibility of maintaining such an intensive model for future cohorts, particularly given the time, human resources, and logistical demands involved.

Response to the Challenges

At the frontline level, PRTC addressed legal and procedural ambiguity within its institutional mandate. Since PRTC did not have legislative authority to issue new legal provisions or binding directives, the programme relied on relevant case law and guidance from legal experts to clarify common and difficult situations. PRTC also developed a decision-tree tool to help staff work through ambiguous cases in a systematic manner. Follow-up spot checks and peer review were used to review how the guidance was applied in practice, although the frequency of these activities was limited by available resources.

At the senior-officer level, PRTC incorporated behavioural learning throughout the 30-day programme. Leadership, empathy, personal well-being, policy engagement, field exposure, and organisational learning were distributed across different stages of the programme so that participants could encounter these themes through different forms of learning. The later stages placed greater emphasis on participant-led presentations and discussion. Officers presented their own research and analysis to ministers and senior officials, creating an opportunity to demonstrate their ability to examine governance issues, communicate findings, and respond to questions. This structure strengthened the link between learning, reflection, analysis, and professional practice.

Outcomes and Evidence

At the frontline level, 537 participants (mostly Ward Secretaries) attended the training sessions, including 493 men and 44 women. Evidence of behavioural change was more difficult to establish than participation or knowledge gained through training. PRTC observed fewer complaints about arbitrary rejection of applications in some municipalities and clearer documentation in several cases. These observations provide early indications of improvement but do not establish a direct causal link between the training and changes in service delivery. The gender composition of the participants also raised an important concern. Women accounted for only 44 of the 537 participants, indicating substantial gender imbalance among the frontline personnel reached through the programme. This suggested that improving service delivery required attention both to staff behaviour and to the composition and distribution of frontline personnel.

The 30-working-day In-Service Training was completed by 37 officers from the ninth and tenth levels of Madhesh Province. The cohort included 13 officers from administration, 9 from health, 6 from agriculture, 5 from engineering, and 4 from forestry. Completion of the

full programme demonstrated the feasibility of sustaining an intensive, multidisciplinary learning programme for provincial officers.

The programme also produced evidence beyond attendance and completion. Participants who initially had limited experience with research presentation later prepared and presented papers on issues such as provincial revenue, foreign employment, the relationship between budgets and periodic plans, and food security before ministers and senior officials. This provided observable evidence of increased engagement in analysis, presentation, and policy discussion. Participants also reported that field visits to marginalised communities influenced how they understood the social and economic conditions faced by citizens who use public services. These responses suggest that experiential exposure contributed to greater attention to citizen perspectives, although longer-term follow-up would be needed to determine whether these changes were sustained in workplace behaviour.

PRTC's contribution to capacity development extended beyond this cohort. Over four years of implementation under PLGSP, the institution delivered several 30-working-day In-Service Training programmes for assistant-level employees and officers at the seventh and eighth levels, as well as induction training for newly recruited government officials. A distinctive feature of these programmes was the integration of behavioural learning with technical and administrative content. Participants were encouraged to reflect on the values, attitudes, and interpersonal skills that support effective public service, including communication, leadership, teamwork, ethics, and citizen engagement. This approach recognised that effective public service requires not only technical competence but also the ability of public servants to communicate effectively, work collaboratively, respond to citizens' concerns, and uphold professional and ethical standards. By incorporating these behavioural dimensions into longer-duration training programmes, PRTC sought to connect technical knowledge with the attitudes and behaviours required in day-to-day public service. This experience highlighted the importance of addressing behavioural competencies alongside technical skills in capacity development and of creating learning environments that encourage participants to reflect on how their knowledge and conduct affect the quality of public service.

Reflection and Lessons

The experience across both the frontline and senior-officer programmes showed that behavioural capacity was the most difficult area of PRTC's work to strengthen. Changes in behaviour require more than training. They also depend on follow-up, workplace conditions, accountability, leadership, and opportunities to apply new knowledge. The experience over four years produced some progress, but it did not establish sustained behavioural change across the institutions involved. For the next Executive Director, a stronger system of follow-up would therefore be a priority. Regular monitoring, case review, and continued engagement after training could help determine whether new knowledge is being applied in

daily practice. Greater attention to the participation of women in frontline service positions is also warranted, particularly where service decisions involve women and girls.

The 30-working-day In-Service Training also showed that behavioural capacity is difficult to develop through lectures alone. Reflection, field exposure, dialogue, role modelling, teamwork, community engagement, and opportunities to address real public problems created different forms of learning within the programme. Integrating these elements into senior-level in-service training was an important step in developing a more responsive and citizen-oriented approach to public administration.

The experience also raised a question about the allocation of training resources. Thirty-seven senior officers received an intensive 30-working-day programme, while 537 frontline staff received shorter, case-based training. This difference is partly justified by the different responsibilities of the two groups, as senior officers influence policy, management, and institutional practices, while frontline staff exercise daily discretion in their interactions with citizens. The next challenge for PRTC, therefore, is to consider how elements of the senior-level model, particularly sustained learning, experiential exposure, structured reflection, and follow-up, can be adapted for frontline staff in a more practical and resource-efficient form.

It is also important to view these initiatives within the broader scope of PRTC's capacity development efforts. During the author's four-year tenure, more than 8,000 individuals, including elected representatives, government employees at various levels, and other stakeholders, participated in a wide range of short-term and long-term training programmes. This broader outreach highlights PRTC's contribution to strengthening human resources and institutional capacity across Madhesh Province, while complementing the more intensive training interventions described above.

Cross-Case Synthesis and Lessons

The three cases show that different forms of capacity development require different timeframes for assessing change. Institutional self-assessment and technical competency development in Case 1 produced outputs that could be documented within a relatively short period, such as assessment findings, action plans, and demonstrated technical skills. Case 2 produced observable changes in the participation and confidence of elected representatives, as well as opportunities for knowledge exchange across successive cohorts of local leaders. Case 3 presented a greater challenge because changes in bureaucratic behaviour are less visible and may take longer to become established. A completed LGPAS or GESI action plan can be verified within months, while changes in how a Deputy Mayor participates in an executive meeting may take longer to observe. Changes in the discretionary behaviour of a Ward Secretary handling an ambiguous citizenship case may require an even longer period of observation. This difference in timing has implications for how capacity development programmes are monitored and evaluated. Applying the same short reporting cycle to all three forms of capacity development can give greater weight to outputs that are easier to document than to changes that take longer to develop.

The three cases also show that institutional, political, and behavioural capacity are closely connected. Case 1 established the importance of institutional self-assessment and technical competence. Case 2 focused on the capacity of elected representatives to understand their roles, participate in decision-making, and engage with other levels of government. Case 3 examined how public officials apply rules and exercise judgement in their interactions with citizens. Progress in one area can be limited when the others remain weak. Elected representatives need sufficient institutional knowledge to use assessment findings and hold administrative institutions accountable. Institutional assessments have greater value when elected leaders use them to set priorities and support improvement. Citizens experience the effects of these processes through the decisions and behaviour of public officials. The three cases therefore point to a connected approach to capacity development rather than three independent programme areas.

The cases also demonstrate PRTC's own institutional learning. In Case 1, the approach moved from viewing assessment primarily as a compliance requirement towards using it as a basis for institutional learning and targeted support. In Case 2, training methods became more participatory in response to participant needs, and targeted programmes were later complemented by integrated sessions involving the wider executive committee. The Bardibas workshop extended this approach by creating a common learning space for newly elected and experienced municipal leaders. In Case 3, behavioural capacity development was incorporated across an extended programme through reflection, field exposure, organisational visits, policy dialogue, and participant-led presentations. Across the three cases, PRTC adjusted its methods in response to participant feedback and implementation experience. This institutional learning was itself consistent with the principle of continuous assessment and improvement that PRTC sought to promote among local governments.

Gender and social inclusion also cut across all three cases, although in different ways. Case 1 included GESI mainstreaming as part of functional capacity development. Case 2 placed women, Dalit, and other marginalised representatives at the centre of targeted leadership development and later brought a wider group of elected leaders into shared learning activities. Case 3 revealed a substantial gender imbalance among frontline training participants, with women accounting for only 44 of 537 participants. Taken together, the cases suggest that training can address some barriers to participation and inclusion, but training alone cannot resolve deeper institutional conditions. Access to decision-making, representation within the workforce, organisational practices, and the distribution of authority also affect whether capacity development leads to more inclusive governance.

A common lesson across the three cases is the need for systematic follow-up and mentoring. Training activities were generally organised as discrete interventions, while capacity development requires continued opportunities to apply, review, and strengthen new knowledge and skills. Regular mentoring, follow-up visits, peer learning, and case review could help connect training with workplace practice. Such support would be particularly

valuable for frontline staff, where daily decisions and interactions with citizens directly affect service experience. The contrast between the intensive 30-working-day programme for senior officers and the shorter case-based training for 537 frontline staff also suggests a need to adapt intensive learning methods to frontline settings in a more practical and resource-efficient form.

The experience also suggests that the three areas of capacity development should not be treated as competing alternatives. Institutional assessment and technical competence provide a basis for identifying and addressing organisational gaps. Elected representatives provide political direction and oversight. Bureaucratic behaviour determines how policies, rules, and decisions are applied in practice. A more effective provincial capacity-development system would therefore connect these areas through shared diagnosis, targeted training, integrated learning, and sustained follow-up. For PRTC, the next stage is not simply to deliver more training but to strengthen the institutional arrangements that allow learning to continue after training ends.

Conclusion

Federalism in Nepal is still relatively new, and Madhesh Province presents significant challenges for its implementation because of its history of marginalisation, high population density, and political and social complexity. PRTC's experience under PLGSP suggests that capacity development is a long-term process that involves institutional, political, and behavioural dimensions. Local governments need to understand their institutional strengths and gaps and develop the technical competencies required to address them. Elected representatives need knowledge, confidence, and opportunities to participate effectively in decision-making. Public officials need both technical competence and the ability to apply rules fairly, exercise judgement, and respond to citizens. The experience also suggests that these areas need to develop alongside one another. Technical and legal training alone cannot produce political confidence or sustained changes in bureaucratic behaviour. At the same time, PRTC cannot address all the factors that influence these areas. Civil service transfer and promotion practices, the composition of the frontline workforce, and appointments to sensitive positions are influenced by institutions and actors beyond its mandate. This limits what training can achieve on its own, but it also highlights the value of a provincial institution that can identify needs, adapt its methods, and provide continued support within its area of responsibility.

The experience is particularly relevant to Madhesh Province because capacity development is closely connected to inclusion. The three cases show how institutional assessment, leadership development, and behavioural capacity can affect participation, decision-making, and the quality of public services. A GESI action plan, greater participation of a Deputy Mayor in executive decision-making, better handling of an ambiguous registration case, or greater awareness among public officials of the conditions faced by marginalised communities does not transform governance on its own. However, these examples provide

practical indications of the changes that capacity development can support. Over four years, PRTC's work demonstrated incremental institutional learning rather than a completed transformation. The experience also showed that training needs to be supported by follow-up, mentoring, institutional dialogue, and opportunities to apply new knowledge in practice. These elements are particularly important where behavioural change is the intended outcome. Continued attention to the participation of women and marginalised groups is also necessary because training cannot by itself resolve unequal access to decision-making, workforce imbalances, or institutional practices that limit inclusion.

More broadly, the PRTC experience suggests that federalism can contribute to more inclusive and responsive governance when provincial and local institutions have the capacity to understand their responsibilities, use evidence, develop practical solutions, and work across levels of government. Capacity development therefore needs to move beyond individual training events and connect research, learning, technical support, and institutional practice. For PRTC, this means developing a stronger institutional role in research, knowledge exchange, and continuous learning while maintaining practical support to provincial and local governments. The longer-term objective is to build a sustainable institution that can continue this work beyond the tenure of any individual leader. The experience presented in this paper does not demonstrate that federal capacity development in Madhesh has been completed or that PRTC's interventions alone produced the changes observed. It does show that sustained institutional learning, adaptation, and cooperation can provide a practical basis for strengthening the capacity required for federal governance in Madhesh Province and across Nepal.

Interview

Leading Capacity Development for Better Governance

An Interview with Basanta Raj Sigdel,
Officiating Executive Director, Nepal Administrative Staff College, Jawalakhel, Lalitpur
Interviewed by Anil Kumar Gupta

1. Looking back on your long association with Nepal Administrative Staff College (NASC), how do you reflect on your journey in the field of public sector capacity development? How has your perspective evolved from your early years at the NASC to your current role as Officiating Executive Director?

Thank you. I am honored to be part of this important conversation.

Public administration plays a vital role in improving public service delivery, promoting good governance, and supporting the country's overall development. My interest in capacity development, however, began long before I joined the NASC. During my time at Nepal Bank Limited, I spent nearly five years working in training and human resource development. That experience strengthened my belief that people are the most valuable asset of any organization. Organizations may have financial, physical, and technological resources, but people determine how effectively those resources are mobilized. For this reason, I have always regarded capacity development as a strategic priority at the individual, institutional, and national levels.

I believe that enhancing people's knowledge, skills, attitudes, and professional capabilities is essential for improving organizational performance and creating new opportunities. Throughout history, major innovations and progress have come from individuals who continued to learn and improve themselves. Capacity development is therefore not limited to acquiring new knowledge or skills. It also enables individuals and institutions to adapt to change, encourage innovation, and create value for the betterment of society at large.

This belief has guided my professional journey. Whether at Nepal Bank Limited or at the NASC, I have consistently believed that people should remain at the center of organizational development and public sector reform. Capacity development is not an option, it’s compulsion. It is a long-term investment that requires sustained policy support and institutional commitment.

Since joining NASC, I have had the opportunity to work closely with ministries, government agencies, and public organizations. During this period, I have seen encouraging progress.

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There is now a much stronger recognition of the importance of learning and professional development. Organizations are investing more in the development of their employees. Training has become a higher institutional priority, and this commitment is increasingly reflected in better organizational performance and institutional improvement.

At the same time, important challenges remain. Although capacity development is widely recognized as a priority, immediate operational demands often take precedence. Many individuals postpone their own professional learning because of day-to-day responsibilities. Likewise, organizations and the government have not yet given capacity development the consistent policy priority as required. Awareness has increased significantly, but there is still a need to foster our collective commitment to continuous professional learning.

Despite these challenges, I remain optimistic. Nepal's Constitution, national development plans, and other policy frameworks place increasing emphasis on capacity development. Institutional arrangements have also expanded. Training centers now exist at both the federal and provincial levels. These developments show that Nepal's capacity development system is becoming stronger and better equipped to respond to changing needs. Although much work remains, I believe we are moving in the right direction.

2. NASC has played a vital role in developing leadership within Nepal's public service. How do you see the relationship between leadership development and capacity development, and what role does NASC play in strengthening public sector leadership?

This is indeed a very important question because leadership development and capacity development are closely connected. Effective public leadership cannot be strengthened without continuous investment in people's knowledge, skills, and professional capabilities. The two reinforce each other and should be viewed as complementary rather than separate priorities.

Our understanding of leadership has also changed significantly over time. In the past, leadership was often regarded as an innate quality possessed by only a few individuals. It was commonly associated with charismatic personalities or exceptional personal traits. This view created the impression that leaders were born rather than developed. Today, research and practical experience present a different understanding. Leadership is a developmental process. It is a lifelong journey of learning through which individuals strengthen their ability to lead change, encourage innovation, and inspire others to pursue shared goals. From this perspective, capacity development is essential for leadership development. Leadership does not develop without deliberate learning, continuous professional development, and opportunities to build new knowledge and skills. Training is therefore not an end in itself. It is one of the primary ways to develop effective leaders.

At NASC, this understanding guide all our learning programmes. Whether we deliver induction training for newly recruited civil servants, in-service programmes for public officials, or executive development courses for senior leaders, leadership development

remains a core objective. We intentionally incorporate leadership competencies into programme design and learning activities. As a result, participants strengthen their ability to perform their current responsibilities while preparing to lead organizational and institutional change.

This commitment is also reflected in the NASC's institutional mission. We define our core purpose as developing leaders who take initiative and make a meaningful contribution to public service. NASC therefore exists not only to provide training but also to develop public sector leaders who can promote innovation, strengthen governance, and improve public service delivery.

3. In today's changing governance landscape, driven by federalism, technological advancement, artificial intelligence, and rising citizen expectations, what competencies should public servants develop? How is NASC preparing them for these emerging challenges?

The environment in which public servants work today is very different from what it was even a decade ago. At NASC, we often explain capacity development through an organic framework what we call the three Cs: *Context, Competence, and Conscience*. These three dimensions are closely connected and provide a practical framework for understanding the competencies required in contemporary public administration.

The first dimension is *context.* Public administration now functions in a period of rapid and continuous change. Technological advances, including artificial intelligence and digital governance, are changing the way governments deliver public services and make decisions. At the same time, Nepal's transition to federalism, rising public expectations for better governance, and new national and global challenges, including geopolitical tensions and economic and social uncertainty, have changed the environment in which public institutions work. Public servants therefore need a clear understanding of the context in which they carry out their responsibilities.

The second dimension is *competence.* Public servants must continuously strengthen their professional knowledge, technical skills, and attitudes so that they can respond effectively to changing demands. These competencies enable them to make informed decisions, develop sound policies, solve complex problems, and deliver responsive public services.

However, competence alone is not enough. This brings us to the third dimension, *conscience.* Public officials need sound ethical judgement to apply their knowledge and skills responsibly and in the public interest. In many situations, the challenge is not a lack of technical expertise. The real challenge is making decisions that reflect integrity, fairness, and public values. Competence determines what we are able to do, while conscience guides how and why we use those capabilities in making decisions, performing actions and demonstrate behavior in given situations.

This framework guides the design of our capacity development programmes at the NASC. We do not focus only on technical knowledge. We also help public servants understand the broader governance environment while strengthening their professional competencies and ethical foundations.

For this reason, we give considerable attention to foundational competencies. These include integrity, ethical values, professionalism, and the core principles of public service. We believe these qualities are essential for building public trust and strengthening accountability in government institutions. We also focus on functional competencies that support effective public administration. Our programmes strengthen participants' capabilities in decision-making, policy formulation, evidence-based policymaking, public procurement, governance, and public service delivery. These practical competencies help public officials perform their responsibilities more effectively and respond to increasingly complex administrative challenges. For example, the Government of Nepal has identified improved public service delivery as a national priority. In response, the NASC recently introduced a dedicated programme for front-desk public officials. The programme develops the skills needed to provide efficient, citizen-centred, and responsive services. It also recognizes that citizens often form their first impression of government through their interaction with front-line officials.

We are also expanding our work in digital transformation. Although this area is still developing, we have introduced programmes on digital governance, artificial intelligence, and the application of emerging technologies in public administration. These competencies will become even more important as technology continues to influence the way government functions.

The NASC also has a broader responsibility to strengthen Nepal's capacity development system. One important initiative is our Training of Trainers (ToT) programme and Certificate Courses in various thematic areas of public administration. These programmes strengthen the competencies of trainers from government organizations and other training institutions. They also help build a strong pool of professional trainers who can extend the benefits of capacity development across the public sector.

4. NASC views training as more than the transfer of knowledge; it sees learning as a catalyst for institutional transformation. From your experience, how can capacity development contribute to organizational and public sector reform?

This is a very important question because capacity development should never be viewed simply as the transfer of knowledge. If learning is to contribute to public sector reform, we need to understand how change takes place within organizations and institutions. I find it useful to think about capacity development at four interconnected levels: the individual, the team, the institution, and the national level. Sustainable institutional improvement begins with individuals. Governments and organizations provide policies, structures, and resources, but people are at the center of capacity development and reform process. Individuals learn, think, innovate, and make decisions. Learning is a uniquely human capability, and every

meaningful organizational change begins when individuals are willing to learn and improve.

Training, however, is not an isolated activity. I often describe it as a tripartite process that involves three key actors: the learner, the trainer or training institution, and the organization where the learner works. The effectiveness of capacity development depends on how well these three actors work together. When they share common objectives, learning is much more likely to improve organizational performance and contribute to institutional reform.

Capacity development primarily focuses on improving individual performance. However, knowledge and skills gained through training have limited value if they are not applied in the workplace. Training can strengthen individual competence, but institutional improvement requires organizations to create an environment where employees can use their new knowledge and skills effectively. This places an important responsibility on employing organizations. They should not only nominate staff for training but also provide opportunities for participants to apply what they have learned after they return to work. Employees should be given responsibilities that allow them to use their new competencies, contribute to organizational priorities, and support ongoing reform efforts.

Training institutions also have an important responsibility. We need to design learning programmes that respond directly to the competencies required for organizational improvement instead of delivering general knowledge and skills. Every programme should begin with a simple question: *What competencies are needed to support the reforms an institution wants to achieve?* Once those competencies are identified, the learning programme should be designed accordingly to develop them.

In my view, this is an area where further progress is needed. Capacity development and institutional reform have too often been treated as separate priorities, even though they are closely connected. The knowledge and skills people gain through learning have real value because they help institutions improve their performance, encourage innovation, and respond effectively to change. Learning is not an end in itself. It is a means of strengthening organizations and improving public sector performance.

When training institutions, employing organizations, and individual learners work toward shared institutional goals, capacity development can become a powerful driver of reform. It strengthens individual performance, improves organizational effectiveness, encourages innovation in the public sector, and ultimately contributes to better governance.

5. How is NASC redesigning its curricula, learning methodologies, and training approaches to respond to changing governance needs and promote transformative learning?

As governance continues to change, capacity development must also change. At NASC, we believe that responding to new governance challenges requires more than updating course contents. It requires a different way of thinking about learning. Our goal is to create

learning experiences that strengthen participants' ability to think critically, solve complex problems, and lead change. We also want learning to be directly relevant to participants' responsibilities at the workplace. Learning should not remain inside the classroom. It should improve professional practice and contribute to better public sector performance. To achieve this goal, we have given greater attention to innovation in learning methods. We continue to diversify and improve our approaches because different competencies require different methods of learning. No single training approach can meet every learning need. We therefore select methods that best support the competencies each programme intends to develop.

One important initiative is the introduction of *Learning Labs.* A Learning Lab is more than a physical space. It is a structured learning process that allows participants to work directly on real policy and governance challenges. Before developing these programmes, NASC conducts research to identify important policy issues of the Government. We work closely with subject experts and government institutions to examine these challenges and identify areas that require policy reform or institutional improvement.

Senior public officials who participate in executive development programmes then work together to address these real issues. Instead of discussing hypothetical cases, they analyze actual policy gaps, examine alternative approaches, and develop practical solutions. NASC designs and facilitates the learning process, while participants contribute their professional experience and institutional perspectives.

Another important feature of Learning Labs is the participation of multiple stakeholders. Effective public policy cannot be developed in isolation. Whenever appropriate, we bring together public officials, political leaders, technical experts, and other relevant stakeholders. This approach helps participants understand different viewpoints and appreciate the complexity of public decision-making.

Our objective is to move beyond the traditional model of training. In the past, participants attended a course, completed the learning activities, and later tried to apply what they had learned in their workplaces. We now place greater emphasis on learning that is closely connected to real governance challenges. Participants work on issues that relate directly to their professional responsibilities. This makes learning more practical, collaborative, and relevant.

This approach also supports our strategic direction of strengthening NASC as a School of Government. We see our role as more than providing training programmes. We also support government institutions in addressing real policy and administrative challenges. Capacity development should make a direct contribution to better governance and improved public service delivery.

At the same time, we continue to strengthen experiential learning. We have expanded field-based learning so that participants can engage directly with government institutions, local communities, and public service delivery settings. These experiences help connect theory

with practice and provide a deeper understanding of administrative realities.

We have also expanded the use of case-based learning. Our faculty members are developing original case studies drawn from Nepal's public administration. These cases allow participants to analyse authentic governance challenges instead of relying mainly on international examples. They strengthen analytical thinking, critical reflection, and evidence-informed decision-making.

For newly recruited civil servants, we place particular emphasis on public service values. Induction programmes cover administrative competence as well as integrity, public ethics, the nature of the state, citizens' expectations, and the responsibilities of public officials. Our objective is to help participants develop these values from the beginning of their careers.

Another important change is our emphasis on a consultative approach to capacity development. We now view capacity development as a continuous process rather than a series of separate training events. In many programmes, NASC works closely with client organizations to understand their specific challenges, provide practical guidance, and support institutional improvement. Our recent work on management audits is a good example. Participants took part in the audit process, developed practical tools, and applied them in real organizational settings under the guidance of NASC faculty.

We are also strengthening research-based learning. We do not view participants only as recipients of knowledge. They also contribute valuable professional experience to the learning process. Through field research, surveys, institutional studies, and collaborative inquiry, participants examine evidence from real governance settings. This process strengthens their analytical and research skills and also generates knowledge that can inform future policy and administrative decisions.

Our overall goal is to make learning more relevant, participatory, evidence-based, and transformative. We believe that methodological innovation, practical engagement, and research-based learning can strengthen capacity development and contribute to better governance and sustained public sector reform.

6. Research, evidence, and knowledge generation are increasingly important in public administration. How is NASC integrating research and evidence-based learning into its capacity development programmes?

Research has become an essential part of our approach to capacity development. At NASC, we believe that learning should not rely only on theory or classroom instruction. It should be informed by evidence, grounded in practice, and closely connected to the realities of governance.

One important change is our stronger emphasis on *research-based learning.* Before designing many of our programmes, we study the policy environment, identify institutional challenges, and conduct background research. This helps us develop learning programmes that respond

to real governance issues instead of hypothetical situations. We are also rethinking the role of participants in the learning process. In the past, trainees were often viewed only as recipients of knowledge. We believe this perspective should change. Public officials bring valuable professional experience, practical insights, and contextual knowledge. They are not only learners but also important contributors to the learning process.

This approach has encouraged us to integrate research directly into our training programmes. We do not limit learning to classroom discussions. Instead, we encourage participants to take part in field research, observation, and analysis. For example, public service delivery can be studied through structured field research carried out in different parts of the country. Participants can observe service delivery firsthand, interact with citizens and public institutions, identify challenges, and collect evidence through a carefully designed research framework.

Learning continues after the fieldwork. Participants analyse the information they have collected, interpret the findings, prepare reports, and reflect on the implications for policy decisions and implementation. This process strengthens their research, analytical, writing, and problem-solving skills. It also gives them a deeper understanding of the realities of public administration.

In this way, research becomes more than an academic exercise. It connects learning with practice and helps participants understand governance challenges through direct experience and evidence rather than assumptions. It also encourages critical thinking and strengthens the analytical competencies that public administration increasingly requires.

Our long-term objective is to promote a culture in which research informs learning, learning improves practice, and practice generates new knowledge. Through the integration of research into capacity development, we aim to develop public servants who are not only competent professionals but also reflective practitioners who use evidence to improve governance and public service delivery.

7. Capacity development requires collaboration among multiple actors. How is NASC fostering collaboration with government institutions and other stakeholders to make learning more relevant and impactful?

Capacity development is, by its nature, a collaborative effort. No single institution can strengthen public sector capacity on its own. Sustainable learning depends on close cooperation among training institutions, government agencies, organizational leaders, and learners.

At NASC, we design many of our programmes in partnership with government institutions. Instead of developing training programmes independently, we begin by understanding the policy priorities, institutional challenges, and capacity needs of the organizations. This helps us design programmes that respond directly to real governance issues and contribute to better public sector performance.

We also believe that learning should bring together a wide range of stakeholders. Through initiatives such as our *Learning Labs,* we create opportunities for public officials, policymakers, technical experts, and other relevant stakeholders to examine policy challenges together, exchange perspectives, and develop practical solutions. This collaborative approach strengthens the learning experience and makes capacity development more relevant and need based.

NASC also recognizes its broader responsibility to strengthen Nepal's capacity development system. In addition to training public officials, we support other training institutions through programmes such as the Certificate Course in Training and other trainer development initiatives. These programmes strengthen the competencies of trainers across different organizations and help improve the overall quality and reach of public sector learning.

At the national level, I believe stronger collaboration is essential. Provincial training centres and other public institutions are making valuable contributions within their respective mandates. The next step is to align these efforts through a coherent national capacity development framework so that individual initiatives contribute to broader public sector reform.

8. Capacity development is often described as a shared responsibility. In your view, what roles should individuals, supervisors, organizations, and the state play in fostering a culture of continuous learning and professional development?

I firmly believe that capacity development is a shared responsibility. Training institutions have an important role, but meaningful and sustained professional development depends on the combined efforts of individuals, supervisors, organizations, and the state. Each has a distinct responsibility in creating an environment that supports continuous learning.

At the individual level, one of the greatest challenges is the lack of a deliberate approach to personal learning and professional development. Many people begin their careers and continue their work without making a clear plan for their own growth. Every professional should have a personal learning and development plan. We should regularly ask ourselves: What competencies do I need to develop this year? What should I learn over the next five years? How can I remain professionally relevant in a rapidly changing environment?

Continuous professional development should not be left to chance. It requires careful planning and sustained commitment. Unfortunately, this practice has not yet become part of our professional culture. As a result, many public officials participate in formal training only after years of intervals. By then, they might have been missed valuable opportunities for learning and professional growth.

At the supervisory level, responsibility extends beyond managing daily work. Supervisors also play an important role in developing the people they lead. They should understand the strengths, potential, and learning needs of their team members. They should provide regular

coaching and mentoring, encourage participation in appropriate learning opportunities, and create a workplace culture that values continuous learning. In practice, however, many supervisors remain focused mainly on day-to-day operational responsibilities. As a result, coaching and mentoring often receive limited attention. Strengthening this aspect of leadership should therefore be a priority for public organizations.

At the organizational level, institutions need to move beyond viewing training as a one-time event. They should identify the competencies required to achieve their strategic objectives, invest in developing those competencies, and provide opportunities for employees to apply what they have learned. Capacity development produces lasting results when learning is closely linked to organizational priorities and institutional performance.

At the national level, the state has an equally important responsibility to provide a coherent policy framework for capacity development. Nepal has made significant progress in recognizing the importance of learning and professional development. However, the country's governance context has changed considerably since the National Civil Service Training Policy was adopted in 2014. Federalism and broader institutional reforms have created new priorities and new capacity needs. There is now a need for an updated and more comprehensive national capacity development policy that provides clear strategic direction for the public sector. Such a policy would help align the efforts of federal, provincial, and local training institutions. It would also establish common standards for programme quality and strengthen the contribution of capacity development to national governance priorities.

I do not believe that the main challenge is limited financial resources. Human capability is the most valuable resource because people create value, generate innovation, and make effective use of all other resources. The greater challenge lies in our willingness to invest in continuous learning and to take personal and institutional responsibility for development. Leadership at every level is essential for moving capacity development forward. When leaders create a culture that values learning, continuous professional development becomes a normal part of institutional life rather than an occasional activity.

9. Looking ahead, how do you envision the future role of the NASC in strengthening public sector capacity and supporting governance reform in Nepal?

I believe the role of NASC will continue to evolve. As governance becomes more complex, the NASC must move beyond its traditional role as a training provider and become a strategic partner in strengthening public sector performance and supporting governance reform.

As a *School of Government,* our role is to deliver training programmes to help government in addressing policy and administrative challenges. Capacity development should be closely connected to government priorities and the practical issues that public institutions face in their daily work. Instead of treating training as a series of isolated events, we want learning to become a continuous process that supports policy development, organizational

improvement, and institutional reform. Our programmes should help public officials analyse complex problems, develop evidence-based solutions, and make better decisions that improve public service delivery.

Research is even more important in this process of reform-oriented capacity development initiatives. We will continue to strengthen research-based learning and produce knowledge that informs both policy and practice. We also plan to continue improving our learning methods through initiatives such as Learning Labs, case-based learning, field-based learning, and consultative approaches to capacity development. These methods help make learning practical, collaborative, and responsive to the changing needs of government.

Another important priority is strengthening Nepal's broader capacity development system. NASC has a responsibility not only to develop public servants but also to support other training institutions and improve the overall quality and coherence of capacity development across the country. This requires stronger collaboration, better coordination among institutions, and a shared national vision for public sector learning.

Our aspiration is to ensure that capacity development makes a direct contribution to better governance of the country. Institutional reforms can establish new structures and systems, but lasting change depends on people. By developing competent, ethical, and forward-looking public leaders, NASC aims to strengthen a public administration that is more responsive, innovative, and better prepared to meet the changing needs of citizens. This is the direction in which we see NASC continues moving in the years ahead.

11. Finally, what message would you like to share with trainers, trainees, researchers, and professionals working in the fields of training, research, and consultancy?

Thank you. If there is one lesson I have learned over the years, it is that every person ultimately seeks two things in life. First, we all want our work and our lives to be meaningful. Whatever our role, whether as public servants, trainers, researchers, consultants, family members, or citizens, we all try our best to make a positive difference. A meaningful contribution gives purpose to our work and direction to our lives. Second, we all want to live with authenticity and purpose. Every role carries its own responsibilities. A student should embrace the responsibilities of being a student. A public servant should uphold the values of public service. A trainer should demonstrate the qualities expected of a trainer. When we perform our responsibilities with sincerity and commitment, our work becomes meaningful and fulfilling.

My first message is simple: treat learning as a lifelong journey, not as a one-time event. Professional development should continue throughout our careers. Every one of us should have a personal learning and development plan that helps us remain professionally relevant and prepared for changing responsibilities.

To trainees, I would encourage active participation in the learning process. Adult learning is not a one-way transfer of knowledge. Every participant brings valuable experience, insights, and perspectives to the classroom. Learning becomes much richer when participants share their experiences, engage in thoughtful discussion, and learn from one another. Equally important is the responsibility to apply new knowledge and skills in the workplace because the true value of learning lies in its practical application.

There is a saying that I find especially meaningful: *"Life has no rehearsals, only performance."* Every moment is part of our real life, not preparation for something that will happen later. Whatever we do deserves our full commitment and our best effort.

Sometimes, we think we are working only for our organizations or our supervisors. I see it differently. Every meaningful contribution also enriches us as individuals. The knowledge we gain, the skills we develop, and the experience we acquire become part of who we are. In that sense, learning itself is an incentive or reward in life.

To trainers, I would say that your responsibility is significant. Trainers do much more than deliver courses. They inspire learning, strengthen professional values, and help others discover new possibilities. To fulfil this responsibility, trainers must also remain lifelong learners. They should continue to update their knowledge, strengthen their competencies, and remain professionally relevant as technology, governance systems, and public expectations continue to change.

I also encourage every trainer to ask one simple question before entering the classroom: *"What new ideas am I bringing in the learning session today?"* Every programme should provide something better than the one before. Continuous improvement and innovation are essential if training is to remain relevant and effective.

It is equally important to understand the learners. Effective training begins with a clear understanding of participants' backgrounds, experiences, expectations, and learning needs. Only then can learning programmes respond to their needs and produce meaningful results.

Finally, I would like to express my sincere appreciation to the Government of Nepal, particularly the Ministry of Land Management, Cooperatives, Federal Affairs and General Administration, public organizations, development partners, and other institutions for their continuous support. Capacity development is a shared responsibility, and meaningful progress depends on collective commitment and collaboration.

Although we have made encouraging progress, much remains to be done. Strengthening Nepal's capacity development system requires continued innovation, strong policy support, and sustained cooperation among all stakeholders. NASC remains fully committed to this mission. We look forward to working together to build a more capable, responsive, and future-ready public service.



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