

## CHAPTER II: HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF THE SLC EXAMINATION SYSTEM \*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The traditional education in Nepal was the Sanskrit Gurukul system characterized by a lack of standardization, uniform admission policy, uniform curriculum, and a system for awarding certificates and diplomas. Besides the Gurukul system, there also existed a few Gompas (Buddhist schools), which prepared monks, and a few Persian or Urdu schools, which imparted education on the culture of the Near East. Education of the secular kind hardly existed in the country in those days.

The replacement of Nepal's traditional system of education (the Gurukul) by a modern secular system of education was inevitable in the historical context. The East India Company of the British Empire had consolidated its hold in India. Under the British rule, English was made the official language as well as the medium of instruction in schools and colleges. Politically speaking, Nepal, as the next-door neighbor of India, could hardly resist the influence of the massive change that had taken place in the life of its mighty neighbor. The British exported their system of education to colonized India but with some changes, and the Nepalese rulers imported this system from India. The British system of education incorporated important features of standardization, e.g. uniformity in the admission process, recruitment of teachers, formulation of courses of study and testing students' capabilities through a mass examination system, and certification saleable in the market. The replacement was inevitable also in the context of the global trends towards a mass culture in the aftermath of emerging universal industrialization and technological revolution.

Nepal is a good example of a developing country that has only recently started its transition to mass culture. The traditional society in Nepal, far from being egalitarian in character, was highly stratified based upon the Varna-Ashram model<sup>1</sup>. The absence of modern cultural artifacts like political parties, mass communicators, professional communication, and legislative actions, etc. helped strengthen the caste system and ethnocentrism. This led to a hierarchical social order, namely, a caste-ridden and priest-dominated social structure with strata of inequality and inequities deeply built in.

Attempts have been made here to study the development of OCE in the context of the major political changes that took place during its lifetime. Accordingly, four phases can be discerned in its steady evolution: (I) the Rana phase (1854 -1950), (II) the Post-Rana phase (1950-1960), (III) the Panchayat Phase (1960-1990), and (IV) the Current Phase (1990-2004). Organized under these four periods, this report presents the conclusions in its final section.

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\* This chapter is based on the report 'Historical Genealogy of the SLC Examination' prepared by Profs. Ratna Man Pradhan, Prem Raman Uprety, Chuda Nath Aryal and Pramila Rajbhandari

<sup>1</sup> P. Prabhu, Hindu Social Organization (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1963).

## 2. THE RANA PERIOD (1846-1950)

### 2.1 Durbar School

The Rana period began on September 15, 1846, when Jang Bahadur emerged as the prime minister and the commander - in - chief of the Nepali army after the Kot Massacre, installing a century of Rana oligarchy in Nepal. Although an illiterate person, Jang Bahadur was highly impressed by the Western education system during his visit of England in 1850-51. He made a personal inspection of many schools and colleges in India run by Christian missionaries. He felt the need to introduce Western system of education in Nepal. He saw two reasons for this. First, the British were going to stay in South Asia for a long period and it was not possible for the Indians to drive them away in the near future. So the best strategy for Nepal was to be in good terms with the British rulers in India. Second, he also saw that English was the window to look at the Western world.

The Ranas established a school named Durbar School (Palace School) because it was set up within the premises of the palace of the prime minister at Thapathali, Kathmandu. The school, which had been started as a primary school, was gradually upgraded to the secondary level in two decades. The school, however, retained its elite character, for only the children of the Ranas and the royal Shah family could attend it. The medium of instruction was English. The subjects taught at the secondary level were English, mathematics, history, geography, and logic as well as languages such as Nepali, Hindi, Bengali, and Sanskrit. The syllabus and the methodologies of teaching were like those prescribed by Calcutta University with which the school was affiliated for accreditation. The system of examination was oral up to class IV, and written only from class V onwards. All question papers were set in English. Students were tested two times a year, in half-yearly and annual examinations.

In 1910, Durbar School was shifted from Thapathali to its present premise at Ranipokhari after which some commoners also found their way into the school. Initially, the opening of Durbar School classes to children of the commoners ran into a snag because of the ethnocentric values of the ruling elites and the highly stratified nature of the Nepali society. Rana children did not like to share the classroom benches with the commoners for they felt themselves to be “a superior breed of people who were ordained to rule and command, while the duty of the masses was to obey and follow.”<sup>2</sup> Secondly, the higher caste people in the Nepali society ( Brahmins and Chhetris) did not like to mix with the children of the lower castes even in the shrine of learning. The result was a decline in enrollment in the school. To solve this enrollment crisis, the Government hastened to provide some incentives to students such as a stipend of five rupees per month and nine muris<sup>3</sup> of paddy per annum. The Government also provided tiffin (snacks) for the students at daytime and free textbooks to poor and talented students who could not afford to buy them.<sup>4</sup>

In the beginning, Durbar School was linked with Calcutta University. Students were tested in a total of eight subjects. Each subject carried a full mark of 100, with the pass mark at 36. Those

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<sup>2</sup> Prem R. Uprety, *Political Awakening in Nepal : The Search for a New Identity* ( New Delhi: Common Wealth Publisher, 1992), p.11.

<sup>3</sup> A muri is a Nepali unit to measure cereals and flour, equivalent to seventy-one kilograms.

<sup>4</sup> Dhundi Raj Bhandari, *नेपालको एतिहासिक विवेचना* (Historical Analysis of Nepal ) ( Banaras: Krishna Kumari, 1958), pp.198-99.

who completed their high school courses had to travel to Calcutta to sit for the Entrance Examination, which was the same as the SLC examination. Later on (1918), Patna University was opted for the entrance examinations. The Government provided students with travel costs and living expenses for the examination period. Patna University conducted the examinations for 5 years (1929-1933). The candidates who were successful in the entrance examination received a warm welcome in Kathmandu in those days (Bhandari, 1958:198-199).

The English system of education was established in Nepal despite heavy opposition launched by the liberal-minded prime minister Dev Shumsher. He saw that neither the Sanskrit system of education nor the British system should meet the needs of the people. To him, the system of education best suited for Nepal were the Bhasa Pathshalas (vernacular schools) and he planned to universalize education through these schools. But his plan to spread education over the mass proved unacceptable to the autocratic interests of his clan members. Dev Shumsher was thrown out of power through a conspiracy and sent to exile in India. With his premature exit, the chances of emergence of a national system of education evaporated. After Dev Shumsher, prime minister Chandra Shumsher continued the spread of English education system, albeit in a very restricted way.

During the Rana period, the Government took no positive measures for maintaining quality education such as giving professional guidance and training to teachers, improving curricula and textbooks, arranging professional meets and interactions of head teachers and teachers, improving the conduct of the SLC examination, and the like.

While the British system of education started taking roots in Nepal, Sanskrit education continued to exist for those who wanted to study Sanskrit grammar and literature and Hindu religious rites and rituals (priestly expertise).

## **2.2 Office of the Controller of Examinations (OCE)**

In 1934 the SLC Board was set up, with the Office of the Controller of Examinations (OCE) as its secretariat, to test the proficiency of the high school graduates of Durbar School and award SLC certificates to successful candidates. Initially, the SLC Board followed the system adopted by two universities in India but made some adjustments on their rules and regulations in ways that suited Nepal. The setting up of the SLC Board was a landmark of the Rana times. However, it was only after the issuance of the Education Ordinance in 1940 that the Board started its operation.

## **2.3 Education Ordinance, 1940**

In 1940, the Government came up with an Education Ordinance with two objectives: (1) to regularize the school education system and (2) to improve the quality of school education. The Ordinance spelled out three mandates to attain these objectives: (a) assess performance of students twice a year – installing a system of half-yearly and annual examinations, (b) report students' performance records (mark sheets) to report the respective parents twice a year, and (c) remove students failing in the same grade for three times consecutively from the school rolls.

## **3. POST- RANA PERIOD (1951-1960)**

During the Rana period, education in Nepal remained essentially the preserve of the rich and the few. This elite character was strengthened further by two other elements: scarcity of educational

institutions and shortage of teaching manpower (Gurung, 1975:62). Thus, by the time when the Rana regime was overthrown by a movement in 1951, Nepal had only 2 colleges, 11 secondary schools, and 321 primary schools. Adult literacy rate stood at a bare 2 percent (Encyclopedia Britannica).

### 3.1 Nepal National Educational Planning Commission, 1954-56

After the fall of the Ranas in 1951, Nepal began to experiment with planned development. Education was accorded a high priority and was recognized as a serious state concern. The people, however, did not wait for the Government and educational institutions sprouted up all over the country under local initiatives. In order to steer this people-initiated growth of education, the Government constituted a Board of Education in 1952. This Board immediately recommended the formation of a Planning Commission to address the educational needs of the country. Accordingly, the Nepal National Educational Planning Commission (NNEPC), the first body of its kind to prepare plans for the development and improvement of education in the country, was set up mandate and to design a comprehensive educational program. The United States Operation Mission (USOM) extended financial assistance.

The Commission submitted its report, known as Education in Nepal, in 1956. The report providing policy guidelines on several aspects of education such as restructuring of levels of school education (with new aims and objectives), functionally designed curricula for primary and secondary schools, a national university with well-defined roles and functions, teacher education, students' progress, and so forth.

The recommendations of NNEPC regarding the examination and assessment of students' progress included student evaluation which according to the Commission should be made broad and comprehensive to cover all objectives of education including the development of worthwhile skills and understanding, physical stamina and strength, character, personality, emotional adjustment, friendliness, etc. The Commission also recommended continuous assessment records of students, learning achievements and scrapping of final examinations in favor of continuous assessment. Among the recommendations were introduction of semester and "credit" system to replace half yearly and annual examinations and letting students repeat only the subjects in which he /she is weak without having to repeat the entire grade, systems of certifying students after 5 years of secondary education, and entrance test for admission of students to colleges and institutions of higher learning.

Although the recommendations on student assessment appeared sound in pedagogical terms, they were not taken seriously and most of them were treated as impractical. The concept of "continuous evaluation", so vigorously recommended, was not in tune with the "two-shots" (half-yearly and annual) examination system. The semester system was never introduced. The recommendation for certification of completion of 5 years of secondary education, two, went unheeded, probably because of the long-time value attached to the SLC Certificate.

Today, after about five decades, if one evaluates the policy guidelines and suggestions on student assessment forwarded by NNEPC, one would not fail to note that their entire set was pedagogically sound and innovative. The set could have been instrumental in catalyzing student assessment system in Nepal, if those guidelines and recommendations were earnestly implemented, guided by educational professionalism and backed by the political will. One will also not fail to note that the Report used the term "evaluation" rather than "examination" and that the whole focus was on scrapping the overly dominant annual/final examination system

designed to measure students' ability to memorize the subject matter and use this measurement for promoting/grading the students. The report also laid stress on the use of continuous assessment of students' progress for providing immediate feedback for their further improvement. Relevance and comprehensiveness of the techniques of evaluation were also addressed.

## **4. PANCHAYAT PERIOD**

### **4.1 All-Round National Education Committee**

In 1960, Nepal entered into a thirty-year period of controlled democracy known as the Panchayat System. It was a partyless democracy. The Governments under this system accorded top priority to education. A high level body called All - Round National Education Committee (ARNEC) was set up in 1961 with mandate to redefine the goals of education and weld the entire education system into Panchayat philosophy Panchayat. As redefined by this Committee, the goals of education should include the inculcation of a feeling of loyalty to the country and the crown, faith in God, spirit of nationalism, and promotion of knowledge of science and technology.

Other recommendations included introduction of two levels of school education- Primary (Grades 1-5) and Secondary (Grades 6-11) and the system of awarding the Primary Education Completion Certificate to students completing the primary level. The Committee, moreover recommended that a comprehensive and regular type of internal assessment structure be introduced at the secondary level and promotion to higher grades be based on performance in internal assessment and final examination and that the pass mark at all levels be set at 40%, 60% for first division and 75% for distinction and that the SLC Examinations in districts should be conducted by Zonal Education Officers as per the instructions of the Department of Education.

### **4.2 National Education System Plan (1971-1976)**

A decade after the introduction of the Panchayat System (1971), the Government came up with a very ambitious macro plan embracing all levels of education, primary to university, and influencing all sub-sectors of education including the student assessment system, known as the National Education System Plan (NESP) (1971-76).

NESP recommended important measures to improve the examination system. Some of them included making internal assessments mandatory from primary level to university, introducing quarterly examinations as a part of internal assessment at school level, and adding 24% of the marks of internal assessment to the scores of SLC examination. Other recommendations included holding the cycle completion external examination for the primary and lower secondary level at the district and zonal levels, conducting the school-level send-up tests at the district level, creating a research unit under OCE for carrying out research studies focused on the improvement of the SLC examination, and decentralizing the conduct of all examinations.

### **4.3 Promulgation of Education Act, 1971**

The Government promulgated the Education Act 1971 to facilitate implementation of the new education system envisioned in the NESP document. To give life and color to the Education Act, the Government came up with the Education Regulations in the same year. It provided a

legal base for educational administration in the country. Among other provisions, the regulations called for the creation of a sub-section in the Ministry of Education entitled Examination Committee. At the beginning, a Joint Secretary of Education headed this committee, but from 1975 onwards, the Secretary of the Ministry himself headed it. The Controller of Examinations acted as its Member Secretary. These Regulations were amended four times by 1977. After the restoration of democracy in 1990, the regulations were amended twice, in 1992 and in 2001. The new regulations of 2001 specified the following objectives of the Controller of Examinations.

- Outline policies for making the SLC examination more efficient and trustworthy.
- Codify the function, duties, and the spheres of jurisdiction of the Examination Committee.
- Outline the power, functions, and duties of the Chairman and the Member Secretary of the Committee.
- Set up a district-level Secondary Education Final Examination Committee with 3 members: Chief District Officer (CDO), Chief of the District Police, and District Education Officer.

The provisions made in the Educational Regulations of 2001 were simply the elaboration of the Act of 1971. These Regulations, no doubt, made OCE stronger both in terms of powers and functions. Some former Controllers of Examination, however, opined that the Examination Committee was only a body of administrators with no representation of stakeholders and subject specialists and could not address the real needs of the students nor could it provide the badly needed technical inputs.

The Education Act of 1971 also made a provision for the district-level Examination Committee to the SLC examination, but without a specific role or relation with OCE.

### Improvement in School Level Examination System under NESP

As per the NESP recommendations, the Government introduced an elaborate examination system to assess the performance of students of the three levels, giving weights to both internal assessment and level of performance in the final examination. The characteristics of this elaborate examination system are described in the table below:

**Table 1. Cycle Completion Examination Scheme**

Cycle Completion Exam & Exam Level	Distribution of Weights (%)	
	Internal Assessment	Final Exam (in %)
Primary Level CCE (At the end of Grade 3) District - Level Exam	40% for 2 Terminal Examinations 20 % for Development of health habits, and social & emotional behaviors	40
Lower Secondary Level CCE (At the end of Grade 8) Zonal Level Exam	20% for 2 Terminal Examinations 10% for 2 Unit Tests 10% for Behavioral change 10% for Homework	50
Secondary Level CCE (Send-Up Test at end of Grade 10) District - Level Exam	20% for 2 Terminal Examinations 10% for 2 Unit Tests 5 % for Homework 5% for Extracurricular activities	60
SLC (National Level Exam conducted at district level for students hardly passing the Send-Up Test)	25% of the internal assessment marks to be added to marks scored at the SLC exam	75

### Contributions of NESP

NESP should be credited for a number of reforms introduced in the school education system. Some of its important contributions to curriculum and assessment are:

- A good amount of work was done in the area of curriculum development, which helped install a continuous process of curriculum development. A uniform curriculum was implemented for the whole country.
- The school textbooks were re-written incorporating matters related to Nepal. Along with the new textbooks came a series of 'Teachers' Guidebooks, which immensely helped the teachers and contained suggestions for teachers about what methods to use for assessing students' learning by lesson.
- A Research Unit was established at OCE to analyze SLC results and provide diagnostic feedback to managers of the school system for continuous improvement in the performance of SLC candidates.

A central - level Examination Committee was set up exclusively for taking care of the improvement of the SLC Examination.<sup>5</sup>

### Failure of NESP

In spite of the many reforms that it brought NESP failed miserably. Of the many explanations put forward to show why despite the strong state support, one particular reason given was that it could not garner support from the critical section of the stakeholders and the people.

## 5. CURRENT PHASE (1990-2004)

Once the multiparty democracy was restored in 1990, attempts were made to improve the quality of education and keep it in line with the education systems of other SAARC countries. Two commissions were appointed and several taskforces were formed to do a situation analysis and suggest the necessary measures for solving the problems in the school education system. In this section, an attempt is made to describe the main features of the reports and their impact.

### 5.1 Report of the National Education Commission of 1992

The first elected Government after the restoration of democracy appointed an education commission called National Education Commission (NEC) in 1991. The Commission was given a list of assignments: redefine the national goals of education; to review all levels of education; examine the standard, relevance, and usefulness of the curricula; recommend appropriate steps for reforming in the examination system and the manner of its conduction; and formulate new policies regarding multi-university and nonformal education.

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<sup>5</sup> Despite the good intent behind setting up the Examination Committee, it later assumed the character of a 'superstructure' above the SLC Board. In the opinion of some ex-controllers, this Committee was denied the representation of important stakeholders and subject specialists. Placed as it was under the Ministry of Education, the Committee could neither provide the badly needed technical inputs nor make any significant decisions for the improvement of SLC examination.

NEC identified a number of problems with the SLC examination and the OCE. Some of the problems identified were problems related to OCE management, conduct of examinations, setting of question papers, and checking of answerbooks.

Lack of coordination between schools and OCE as well as lack of orientation of teachers and administrators involved in examination were two other problems noted. In an effort to bring the long-needed improvement in the SLC examination system, the Commission made several recommendations, some of which are adoption of a decentralized policy in conducting SLC Examination; initiation of appropriate reforms in three areas of question setting, examination of the answer scripts, and result publication; development of OCE as an autonomous body; evaluation of the performance of students on the basis of tests administered in monthly, quarterly, half-yearly, and annual examinations at each level; and evaluation of the teachers on the basis of the students' performance of students.

Three of these recommendations made have been implemented. First, the management of the SLC examination has been decentralized at the regional level. Secondly, training programs have been organized to acquaint the subject experts with the technical aspects of evaluation. Thirdly, the long delay (6 to 8 months) in the publication of the SLC results has been addressed. Today the results are published within two months of the examination.

## **5.2 Report of the Secondary Education Development Project, 1997**

The Secondary Education Development Project (SEDP), funded by a loan from the Asian Development Bank and a grant from the British Government, was introduced in 1997 to bring improvement in four areas: (1) curriculum and textbook development, (2) teachers' effectiveness/competency, (3) learning assessment/examination, and (4) overall planning, management, and evaluation of the secondary education sub-sector.

SLC reform was one important objective. The Government approved an SLC-specific plan known as "A Strategic Plan for Examination Reform", blueprinted by SEDP. Along with this strategic plan came a consultative document with the title "A New SLC for the year 2058 BS and beyond" in November 1997, which made strong criticisms of the SLC examination. Some of them are listed below:

- The current SLC examination system offers certification to only a small minority; it should not be so restrictive. Passing does not necessarily carry any actual entitlement for a Government post or a place in higher education. Candidates often require grades well above the basic pass level in some or all subjects even to enter the selection process. SLC is therefore generally a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for access to higher education or Government employment.
- SLC, in its present form, is not an effective guarantee of educational quality. The type of questions used places a heavy emphasis on recall, on filling students' minds with information.
- There is an almost total absence of teaching/assessment of skills and abilities that can be assessed by an examination paper such as the ability to plan and implement a project or investigation, or to engage in some form of practical work.

The Project Report proposed a number of strategies for reform of the SLC system. Some of the important ones are as follows:

- SLC should be given a new name like “Certificate Completion of Secondary Education,” which not only signals substantive change in the existing system but also brings about real change and helps mobilize support.
- The certificate should be made more descriptive of the achievement of the individual student. To achieve this, the scoring currently done in terms of numerals should be replaced by the letter grade system, which would enable us to positively recognize as many individuals as possible and help eliminate the Pass, Fail, and Distinction categories.
- The core subjects (e.g., mathematics, science, Nepali, and English) determined, the students ought to be given a wide range of options, as far as possible, regarding their choice of optional subjects. Schools should be allowed to develop their own optional courses. But the teaching of these optional courses should be made subject to rigorous monitoring by OCE.
- It is desirable that the school-based assessment system attains success since it is the most important component of SLC reform. So a comprehensive manual to guide the school teachers on each subject needs to be prepared

The report cautioned that the reform of the SLC system had to be phased out according to a strategic plan to allow students and teachers to adjust themselves to the change.

### **5.3 Secondary Education Perspective Plan, 1997-2001**

Another important contribution of the SEDP Project was the preparation of the Secondary Education Perspective Plan (SEPP) in January 1997 with ADB loan assistance and DFID grant. This plan included the following SLC-related objectives:

- Explore the possibility of introducing single subject certification.
- Decentralize the examination management.
- Strengthen the capability of OCE.
- Reintroduce the formative assessment system.
- Conduct the SLC Examination in only 5 core subjects.
- Make OCE collaborate with CDC for development of quality tests and improved marking schemes.
- Make OCE autonomous with authority to retain and use its revenues for its own improvement

As per the intents and vision of SEPP/ SEAP and the changing needs of time, OCE started undertaking several reform measures in 1997/98. Their implementation continues to this day and is mostly focused on improvement in the management of examinations and quality of question papers. Some of the actions taken up are described below:

#### **Examination Quality Enhancement**

- Preparation and dissemination of a specification chart (with model test items) for Grade 8 district - level examination

- Preparation and dissemination of a specification chart (with model test items) for Secondary level examination
- Orientation/training on construction of test items and marking schemes based upon the newly prepared specification chart
- Preparation and use of parallel sets in English and compulsory mathematics and multi-sets in all other subjects
- Initiation of an oral examination in SLC examination to assess listening and speaking skills in English
- Training for the monitors of English oral examination
- Conducting orientation/training for the markers and scrutinizers of SLC answer scripts.
- Short-term trainings for lower secondary teachers on the construction of improved test items and preparation and use of marking schemes.

### **Decentralization of Examination Management**

For a smooth operation and monitoring of the SLC examinations, OCE has made the regional and district - level offices accountable. Both these offices now receive fund from OCE for the management /holding of SLC examination. Examination sections exist today in all the five Regional Education Directorates and the seventy - five District Education Offices.

### **Administration of Examination**

Administration of the Send-Up Test has been entrusted to secondary schools. The district -level Examination Coordination Committee has been empowered to make decisions with regard to the selection of SLC examination centers. Since 1996 (2052 BS) REDs have been authorized to distribute copies of mark sheets, issue provisional migration certificates, and make corrections on names, castes, birth dates, etc in compliance with the OCE rules and regulations. REDs have also been entrusted with the work of monitoring and supervision of SLC examinations in various districts within their jurisdictions.

### **Marking and Scrutiny of Answerbooks**

Under SEPP, several marking centers have been set up for answerbook checking. These centers are also given the responsibility of coding the answerbooks before they are sent to the examiners. On completion of marking and scrutiny, the centers also do the decoding and copy the marks in the markslips, which they send to OCE.

## **5.4 Report of the High Level National Education Commission, 1998**

Seven years after NEC (1992) made sets of recommendations for the improvement of the education sector, another commission was appointed in 1998. The 1998 Commission made several recommendations to improve the student assessment system some of which are phasing out of the annual system and gradual implementation of the semester system, introduction of the letter grading system and making internal assessment a vital component of the school curriculum. Other recommendations include gradual development of OCE as an autonomous

institution, making REDs responsible for conducting SLC examinations and conducting SLC examination at the end of Grade 12.

The Government did not straightaway implement the recommendations made by the two commissions. Instead, it formed four special taskforces, each headed by Government bureaucrats, presumably to screen the measures suggested and choose the best, viable, and important ones for implementation. The taskforces added a number of new recommendations in their town adding further to the complexity of the reform package.

The report on the four taskforces presented to the Minister of Education and Sports in 2001 endorsed the use of the specification grids for preparing test papers and recommended that the grids be made available to teachers at subsidized rates and that orientation/training be organized for teachers on how use them. The report raised questions on the difficulty level of the multi-set question papers used by OCE and recommended the use of parallel question sets instead. It also reiterated the need to have an Item Bank established at OCE. Its long-term recommendations included the establishment of five regional offices of OCE for better management and supervision of examination as well as for reducing the workload at the center. Adoption of the letter grading system, computerization of old records of SLC results, discontinuation of financial grants to schools failing to secure the minimum pass rate of 30% in the SLC examination, etc. were also mentioned.

### **5.5 Recent Reform Measures at OCE**

OCE has recently initiated some reforms to enhance the quality of SLC examination as per the recommendations made by SEDP/SEEP. The important initiatives taken in 1997-2003 are as follows:

- Preparation and dissemination of specification charts with model test items for lower secondary and secondary cycle completion examinations
- Orientation training for test developers on the construction of test items and for answerbooks markers on the newly prepared specification charts
- Preparation and use of parallel sets (English and mathematics) and multi-sets in all subjects of SLC examination
- Initiation of oral examination in SLC examination to assess students' listening and speaking skills in English
- Short-term trainings for lower secondary teachers on the construction of improved test items and use of marking schemes

Some headway was made in the period towards delegating authorities (decentralization) to district-level offices for smooth management of SLC examination. Some of the important decisions made during this period were:

- DEOs have been made more independent and powerful in terms of monitoring and management of the examination by allocating funds to them.
- OCE has started sending the money needed for the management of SLC examination to DEOs with authority to spend it keeping within the budget limits.

- Regional and district-level offices have been made more accountable; examination units have been created in all five REDs; and a SLC Examination Coordination Committee has been established in every district education office.
- Administration of send-up tests has been delegated to secondary schools and the district - level Examination Coordination Committee has been empowered to make decisions on the location of SLC examination centers.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

OCE has passed through several distinct phases in its history and the SLC Board through many changes and reforms since its inception. Starting with 34 candidates, OCE now caters to over 300,000 examinees, which means a 8823 - fold growth.

Initially established to conduct school examinations for the children of Kathmandu elites, OCE has now become an organization to serve the needs of the Nepalese masses. For many years after inception, it had conducted the examination only at one center in the capital. Today, examination is held in around 900 examination centers in various districts. OCE must be lauded for the way it has been doing for the smooth management of the SLC examination in so many centers scattered all over the country.

OCE has recently introduced some reform measures as recommended by various educational bodies. These include development of parallel sets of questions, coding of answerbooks, preparation and dissemination of the specification of grids to serve as models for framing better test items, and regular holding of orientation/trainings for test developers and answer markers and scrutinizers.

OCE has, indeed, achieved tremendous progress in its history of seventy years. There is, however, much to be done. The challenge for OCE is not only to be able to conduct the SLC examination for the ever-increasing number of students across the country with ease and efficiency, but also to play a catalytic role with CDC and other educational agencies in improving the quality of school education. The biggest problem that confronts OCE today, however, is the high rate of failure in the SLC examination every year.

Analysis of SLC results of the past fifteen years (1985-2004) reveals a failure rate of over 60 percent on average. Further analysis of the 2060 SLC results (Bhatta, 2004) shows that public schools that are mostly attended by students from rural areas with socially and economically disadvantaged background tend to perform poorly at an alarming scale. There is also a wide gap in performance between the boys and girls and among the various development regions.

Apart from the social, political, and economic reasons for these wide disparities in performance levels, experts have questioned the technical quality of the SLC examination. It is claimed that the SLC test items are not standardized and that the test reliability is also low. It is also reported that the test items are poorly constructed and ambiguous words put rural children in disadvantage. Some even claim that in some subjects of such as mathematics and science, some of test items are too difficult for the average public school student. In recent years, due to the Government's policy of limiting examination centers only to district headquarters for security reasons, many rural children, particularly girls, have reportedly been forced to take the SLC examination in difficult circumstances away from home. This has further aggravated the disadvantage that rural children face.

Educationists all around the world commonly believe that changing the system of public examination is one of the most powerful 'levers' of educational reform. It is generally agreed that high quality assessment is essential for a high quality education. High quality assessment, however, is possible only when an organization like OCE develops into a strong national institution with high-level professional and administrative competence and resources. But this is possible only when adequate, policy and resource support becomes available to this organization, which has faithfully served the country all these years.