Study on

Mapping Existing Knowledge Of Potential Youths, RPL Graduates & Employers

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Final Report on

'Study on Mapping Existing Knowledge
Of Potential Youths, RPL Graduates & Employers'

NEPAL VOCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS SYSTEM PROJECT-PHASE II (NVQS P-II)

Submitted By

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Executive Summary

The Nepal Vocational Qualifications System Project Phase II (NVQS P-II) is a partnership between the Government of Nepal and the Government of Switzerland. It is managed by the Council for Technical Education and Vocational Training (CTEVT) and the National Skill Testing Board (NSTB) under the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology. As the project nears its end, it sets out to learn what RPL graduates, interested youths, and employers know about the project and its processes.

This research was carried out in June 2025 across three provinces where the project is active: Koshi (Biratnagar, Birtamod, Damak, and Itahari), Gandaki (Pokhara, Baglung Bazar, and Palungtar), and Sudurpaschim (Dhangadhi, Mahendranagar, and Tikapur). The research used a mixed-methods approach, combining both surveys and interviews. In total, 134 people took part in the survey (51 RPL graduates, 57 potential youths, and 26 employers). Additionally, 118 people participated in interviews, including 62 key informant interviews (KIIs) and 56 participants in nine focus group discussions (FGDs). Researchers also observed the activities.

Provincial and local government officials, who help run the project, know the NVQS/RPL process quite well. The same goes for employers, skill test centers, and representatives from the private sector and labor associations who have attended NVQS meetings or filled out test forms. RPL graduates who appeared on the skill test also understand the process well.

Potential participants are also aware of NVQS/RPL. They see it as an opportunity to advance in their work, transitioning from a laborer to a mason, or from level one to level two, and potentially becoming trainers in the future. The value of the official certificate they receive is high, which helps them get recognized in government contracts and improves their bargaining power at work.

Interestingly, the language respondents use to describe NVQS/RPL varies. RPL graduates and potential candidates see it mainly as a "skill test," a way to "upgrade," or a "legal document achievement process." On the other hand, some employers and private sector representatives view it as a challenge, fearing it could increase workers' bargaining power or lead them to leave their jobs. The positive side is that many RPL graduates who have successfully passed the skill test are now encouraging others in their networks to participate in the skill tests. Meanwhile, officials and test centers agree that while the NVQS framework follows international standards, Nepal still needs to build a more supportive environment to benefit from this system fully.

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Abbreviation

APL: Accreditation of Prior Learning

CBS: Central Bureau of Statistics

CTEVT: Council for Technical Education and Vocational Training

FGDs: Focus Group Discussions

FNCCI: Federation of Nepalese Chambers of Commerce and Industry

GESI: Gender Equality and Social Inclusion

HAAN: Hotel Association of Nepal

ILO: International Labour Organization

KIIs: Key Informant Interviews

MoLESS: Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security

NQF: National Qualifications Framework

NSTB: National Skill Testing Board

NVQS: Nepal Vocational Qualifications System

NVQS P-II: Nepal Vocational Qualifications System Project Phase II

OECD: Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development

OJT: On-the-Job Training

PLA: Prior Learning Assessment

RPL: Recognition of Prior Learning

SDC: Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation

TVET: Technical and Vocational Education and Training

UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

VNFIL: Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning

VQ: Vocational Qualification

Introduction

The Nepal Vocational Qualifications System Phase II (NVQS-P II) is a joint program of the Government of Nepal and the Government of Switzerland. It has been implemented by the Council for Technical Education and Vocational Training (CTEVT) through the National Skill Testing Board (NSTB), under the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology. The program is funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), with technical support provided by a Swiss contact on behalf of SDC.

The main aim of the program is to improve the employability of Nepali youth. To achieve this, the program focused on three key areas. One major area was raising awareness among youth and employers about the Vocational Qualification (VQ) system, how to apply for certification, the benefits of certification, and how the process works. A range of activities was carried out to share this information and to establish the NVQS/RPL framework.

As the program has now reached its final stage, it has become important to understand how much people know about the VQ system and what their experiences and perceptions are in the working area. The research focused on three key groups: potential workers who are considering applying for skill certification, those who have already gone through the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) process and employers from various sectors who need skilled workers.

The research explored how well these groups understand the NVQS/RPL system, how useful they find the certification, and how it has impacted their employment opportunities or business operations. The findings help identify gaps, challenges, and opportunities for improvement. These insights will support efforts to strengthen policies, improve communication and outreach, and make the vocational qualification system more inclusive, accessible, and effective for all.

Literature review

Globally, RPL is recognized under varying terminologies, including Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL), Prior Learning Assessment (PLA), and Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning (VNFIL) (Anderson, Fejes, & Sandberg, 2013; UNESCO, 2012). Despite differing nomenclatures, RPL universally refers to a systematic process that identifies documents, assesses, and certifies individuals' competencies acquired through formal, non-formal, or informal means against established occupational standards (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2024). According to Bhandari (2024), the purposes of RPL can be grouped into three broad categories: social justice, social change, and economic development. Social justice emphasizes equitable access to education and employment opportunities, social change advocates for increased social mobility and inclusivity, and economic development focuses on improved labor market efficiency and productivity (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2021). These purposes underscore the integral role of RPL in fostering lifelong learning, enhancing employability, and facilitating labor market integration.

The Nepal Vocational Qualifications System (NVQS) is a strategic mechanism designed to consolidate and standardize skills recognition across diverse sectors of the economy. Approved by the government in 2020, the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) underpins the NVQS by establishing competency-based standards across basic education, technical and vocational education and training (TVET), and higher education (Nepal Vocational Qualifications System [NVQS], 2023).

RPL plays a central role within the NVQS, particularly in addressing the challenges posed by the widespread informal sector employment and high rates of labor migration. The Council for Technical Education and Vocational Training (CTEVT) and its National Skill Testing Board (NSTB) serve as the primary institutions overseeing RPL in Nepal (Bhandari, 2024). The RPL process under NVQS typically involves application submission, counseling by RPL counselors, evidence verification, skill testing, and final certification (NVQS, 2021).

Despite its foundational role in the NVQS, the RPL process in Nepal remains at an emerging stage. By 2023, only around 1,500 individuals had participated in the RPL process, reflecting limited reach relative to the vast population engaged in informal employment (NVQS, 2023).

Nepal's labor market is characterized by high unemployment (11.7%) and underemployment (39.3%), with significant underutilization of youth labor; an alarming 69% of the unemployed workforce comprises youth (Central Bureau of Statistics [CBS], 2019). Furthermore, a staggering 62.2% of the employed population works in the informal

sector under precarious conditions, with women and disadvantaged groups being disproportionately affected (CBS, 2019).

Migration further complicates the employment landscape. From 2008/09 to 2021/22, over 4.7 million Nepali workers migrated abroad, predominantly without formal skills training (Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security [MoLESS], 2022). Despite these migrants' significant contribution to the national economy, remittances accounted for NPR 961.2 billion in 2020, their skills remain largely unrecognized upon return. According to the Labor Force Survey (2017/18), only 42.8% of returnee migrants were employed domestically, while 13.4% were unemployed, and 43% remained outside the labor force (CBS, 2019).

In this context, RPL emerges as a vital mechanism for recognizing the skills and competencies of both informal workers and returnee migrants. Bhandari (2024) highlights how RPL can improve labor market integration, self-esteem, and social inclusion, while also enabling access to further training. Employers, in turn, benefit from verified documentation of workers' skills, enhancing productivity and competitiveness.

Study Objectives

The primary objective is to map the existing knowledge of potential youths, RPL graduates, and employers regarding NVQS and RPL processes. Specifically, the study aims to:

**For Potential Youths and RPL Graduates**
- Assess their level of awareness and understanding of NVQS and RPL (Applying for skill assessment, self, and motivating others).
- Identify sources of information they rely on for vocational qualifications and employment.
- Examine their perceptions of skill certification and its impact on employability.

For Employers
- Assess their awareness and understanding of NVQS and RPL.
- Examine their perceptions of skill certification and its benefits on business and industries.
- Identify their willingness to recognize and prefer certified workers.

Study Areas

The study was conducted at Sudurpaschim province (Dhangadhi, Kanchanpur, Tikapur), Gandaki province (Pokhara, Baglung Bazar, Palungtar), and Koshi province (Biratnagar, Itahari, Birtamod, Damak)
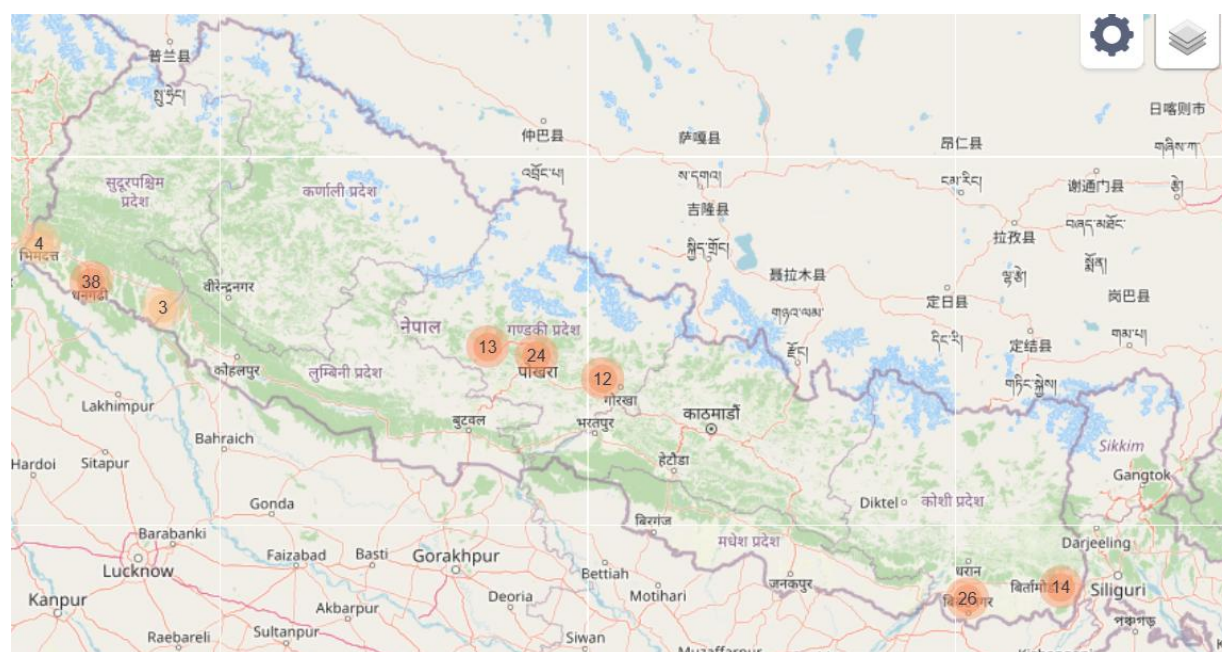
Methodology

Research Design

A mixed-methods research design was employed, combining structured surveys (quantitative) with focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs) (qualitative) to triangulate findings and provide a comprehensive understanding of the study subject.

The quantitative component was focused on structured surveys to assess existing knowledge among potential youths, RPL graduates, and employers. These surveys tried to ensure key indicators related to awareness, perceptions, and engagement with vocational qualifications and employment systems.

To complement this, the qualitative approach included FGDs and KIIs, capturing the lived experiences and perspectives of the same groups. These participatory methods yield in-depth, narrative insights into the tones of knowledge and attitudes, particularly with vocational recognition and employment pathways.

Sample Size and Sampling Methods

Data Collection Tools/Techniques and Strategy
The research has adopted a mixed-methods approach, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative methods, to comprehensively understand stakeholders' awareness, perceptions, and engagement with the NVQS/RPL system, with a few queries of the Shramsansar Portal as well.

Quantitative Sample: Respondents were targeted from the study area through stratified random sampling for RPL graduates, snowball sampling for potential youths, and purposive sampling for employers.

Stratified Random Sampling for RPL Graduates was employed for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) graduates to ensure a representative and inclusive sample that captures the diversity of the population based on key demographic variables such as gender, caste, ethnicity, and geographic location to minimizes selection bias and enhances the generalizability of findings, allowing the study to reflect the perspectives of marginalized groups, such as women and ethnic minorities, who are critical to the Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI).

Purposive Sampling for Employers was employed for employers to target individuals or entities with specific expertise or involvement in vocational training, skills certification, or

hiring practices relevant to NVQS and RPL systems, which method ensures that the qualitative insights gathered are contextually grounded and directly address the study's objectives of understanding employer perceptions and engagement.

Snowball sampling was employed to select potential people who were particularly suitable because potential people interested in NVQS/RPL were often part of informal or hard-to-reach networks that were found in community groups or peer circles, with the initial contacts made with RPL graduates, vocational training providers, and employers. *For detailed survey questions, see Annex I, II, and III.*

Theoretical Ground

This study, conducted in June 2025, primarily evaluates stakeholder awareness and perceptions of the NVQS/Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) framework in Nepal. The research aligns three key theoretical frameworks: a. human capital theory, b. social learning theory and c. institutional theory which provide a strong foundation for understanding skill certification, knowledge dissemination, and systemic adoption. These theories are contextualized to explain the study's findings and implications.

Human Capital Theory suggests that investments in education and training enhance individual productivity and economic outcomes (Becker, 1964). The NVQS P-II study reflects this theory by focusing on skill certification to improve employability among Nepali youths. The findings indicate that RPL graduates value certification for career progression (e.g., advancing from labor to mason) and increased bargaining power in labor markets, particularly for government contracts. This aligns with human capital theory's assertion that skills development yields tangible economic benefits, such as improved job prospects and wages. For employers, certified workers enhance business efficiency, supporting Becker's view that human capital investments benefit both individuals and organizations.

Social Learning Theory, proposed by Bandura (1977), emphasizes learning through observation, imitation, and social interactions. The study illustrates this theory in how respondents get knowledge and prepare them for RPL graduation; learn about certification processes through peer networks, vocational training providers, and community groups, as proved by the study's use of snowball sampling to access these informal networks. RPL graduates' encouragement of others to participate reflects Bandura's concept of modeling, where individuals follow observed behaviors. The qualitative methods, such as focus group discussions (FGDs), capture these social learning dynamics, closely fitting how shared experiences shape perceptions of certification and its value.

Institutional Theory explains how organizational structures and norms shape behaviors and outcomes (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The study applies this theory to examine how

institutional actor's government officials, skill testing centers, and private sector representatives facilitate or hamper the system's adoption. The findings show that these actors are knowledgeable in NVQS/RPL processes, reflecting institutionalized practices.

The mixed-methods approach, combining surveys, FGDs, and key informant interviews, is grounded in methodological triangulation, ensuring comprehensive insights (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Sampling strategies stratified random sampling for RPL graduates, purposive sampling for employers, and snowball sampling for potential youths reflect theoretical considerations of inclusivity and context, addressing Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) principles.

The study is theoretically grounded in human capital theory, social learning theory, and institutional theory, which explain the economic, social, and systemic dimensions of skill certification. These frameworks provide a lens to interpret respondents' awareness, knowledge dissemination, and institutional challenges, guiding efforts to enhance the vocational qualification system's effectiveness.

Thematic Direction

Before starting fieldwork, five main themes were identified to guide data collection. These themes helped design the survey tools and organize interviews and group discussions, ensuring a clear approach to gathering views from three key groups: potential youth, RPL graduates, and employers.

The first thematic area focused on initial awareness and information sources. It explored whether participants had heard of the NVQS/RPL process, and how they first received this information, whether through television, radio, social media, training providers, family or friends, or local government authorities.

The second thematic area assessed the knowledge and understanding of NVQS/RPL processes among the respondents. This included examining their awareness of NVQS/RPL objectives, the process for RPL, familiarity with skill test procedures, and understanding of different certification levels.

The third thematic area probed into perceptions and experiences of certification. It aimed to understand how respondents perceived the value of certification in improving employability, income, and job security to explore personal sentiments before and after receiving certification and direct experiences with the RPL testing and certification process.

The fourth thematic area investigated advocacy and information-sharing practices. It focused on whether certified individuals and employers actively promoted NVQS/RPL

certification within their networks for example, by motivating others to apply or selecting certified candidates in recruitment decisions.

The fifth thematic area gathered suggestions for improvement and additional insights. All respondent groups were asked to provide recommendations to enhance the relevance, accessibility, and effectiveness of the NVQS/RPL framework. This included recommendations for better outreach strategies, opportunities for collaboration with employers, and feedback regarding the Shramsansar platform.

Data Analysis

Thematic Basis of the Analysis: The analysis was conducted based on five main themes: how people first heard about RPL, their understanding of NVQS/RPL processes, their views and experiences with certification, how information is shared and promoted, and their suggestions for improvement.

Quantitative Analysis

i. Key findings - Potential youths

Maximum respondents (73.7%) were not returnee migrants, and a large majority (75.4%) had participated in any vocational training. Only 63.2% had heard about the NVQS/RPL system mainly through training providers (61.1%) and friends/relatives (33.3%). Understanding of NVQS certification benefits was largely strong (88.9%). Awareness of the RPL process was fairly good (64.9%), and among them, about two-thirds (67.6%) knew how and where to apply.

Knowledge of NVQS skill levels was also high (77.8%), and most (60.7%) understood how to apply for an RPL skill test, though some were only somewhat clear. Remarkably, 82.9% believe men and women have equal opportunities, and most women respondents (95.5%) felt strongly supported by family or community to pursue vocational training. While most respondents agreed or strongly agreed that certification improves job prospects (70.1%), a sizeable portion (29.8%) remained neutral.

Accessibility of the certification process was generally perceived as "fairly accessible" (93.0%). Decisions to apply were mostly self-driven (97.6%), and only a few cited barriers like lack of information or exam issues. Information about NVQS/RPL was seen as very accessible (69.4%), and over half (56.1%) had seen related campaigns. Encouragingly, 86% planned to apply for skill certification soon, motivated primarily by skill recognition (87.8%) and better employment opportunities.

Despite high confidence in completing the RPL process (77.6% very confident), awareness and use of the Shramsansar Portal remained low, with only 17.5% having heard of it and just one person reporting actual use. While knowledge, motivation, and perceived support for NVQS/RPL certification are strong, practical awareness of certain tools and broader promotional outreach could still improve.

ii. Key findings of RPL graduates
Most participants learned about the RPL process through NVQS staff and training centers (both at 35.3%), followed by family/friends (25.5%), while employers and local authorities played smaller roles.

The RPL certification process was largely seen as easy (60.8%) or moderate (35.3%), with very few finding it difficult. Nearly all respondents (96.1%) felt the assessed skills were relevant to their job experience, and almost everyone (98%) received their certificates on time despite also reporting associated costs.

Importantly, about two-thirds (64.7%) felt the RPL certificate improved employment or income opportunities, mostly through boosted self-esteem (84.8%) and some via promotions or better pay. Almost all respondents were employed before and after certification, and 96.1% reported that their skills were recognized by employers or the community.

Confidence also increased significantly for most (84.3%). A large majority (92.2%) believe men and women have equal access to NVQS/RPL services, though 11.8% reported gender-based challenges.

To encourage more women, suggestions included female trainers (23.5%), childcare services (11.8%), community awareness (35.3%), and others. Decisions to apply were driven mainly by self-motivation (100%). Particularly, most never used the Shram Sansar Portal (88.2%), and only a few found it helpful.

iii. Key Findings of Employer
The data shows that half of the surveyed organizations operate in the construction sector, followed by hospitality (19.2%) and a mix of others (26.9%), with most being small (46.2%) or medium enterprises (38.5%).

Despite their varied sizes (ranging from just a few to over 100 employees), awareness of NVQS and the RPL process is high (88.5% and 84.6% respectively), largely spread through government associations.

Majorities (61.5%) have hired certified individuals, and 92.3% believe these workers perform better, while 69.2% would prefer hiring certified workers over non-certified ones.

Most employers think certification ensures better skills and productivity (92.3%) and see formal certification as very important (88.5%).

Employers commonly reported high turnover (61.5%) and other challenges like informality and skill mismatch. Encouragingly, most organizations offer on-the-job training (65.4%) and check for certification sometimes when hiring.

Openness to collaborate with NVQS is strong (92.3%) for both skills assessment and internships/apprenticeships, and every respondent would recommend NVQS certification to others. Nearly all (96.2%) actively encourage hiring certified women workers. However, adoption of the Shramsansar Portal remains low, with only 23.1% registered, limited job postings, and most respondents (84.6%) unsure about its user-friendliness, showing the need for greater portal promotion and training. Overall, employers strongly value certification and recognize its impact, but there is room to better integrate digital tools and address sectoral challenges.

Cross-Provincial Comparison & Synthesis

Analyzing the data across the three provinces, **Koshi, Gandaki, and Sudurpaschim,** shows the important differences and shared patterns in awareness, participation, and inclusion related to the NVQS/RPL process.

Gandaki province reported the highest survey participation with **49 respondents (36.6%)**, followed by Sudurpaschim with **45 respondents (33.6%)**, and Koshi with **40 respondents (29.9%)**, suggesting stronger engagement in Gandaki, possibly due to more training providers and coordinated local initiatives.

The qualitative data further illustrate stakeholder diversity: Sudurpaschim's KIIs and FGDs included a notable number of women and indigenous nationalities from Dhangadhi; Koshi's participants represented a broader age and caste range, including Brahmin, Chhetri, Madhesi, and indigenous nationalities across Biratnagar and Itahari; and Gandaki engaged Dalit, Brahmin, Chhetri, and indigenous stakeholders from Pokhara and Baglung, with women and marginalized groups actively participating.

Sectorial differences also emerged, with Gandaki showing stronger links to hospitality and garment sectors, Sudurpaschim focusing more on construction, and Koshi including sectors such as plumbing, painting, and automobile.

Awareness and participation tended to be higher in urban centers, while remote and rural areas showed lower engagement. Notably, Gandaki and Sudurpaschim demonstrated relatively better inclusion of women and Dalit participants, whereas Koshi's sample

remained more male-dominated, reflecting broader gender gaps identified in the survey data. This synthesis highlights how local context, stakeholder mix, and sectorial focus shape NVQS/RPL engagement across provinces.

Awareness of NVQS was higher in Gandaki (63.2% of potential youths aware) compared to Sudurpaschim (56.1%) and Koshi (43.9%).

Sudurpaschim, with a significant rural population (e.g., Dhangadhi, 28.4%), reported more gender-based challenges, with 17.1% of respondents unsure about equal opportunities for men and women.

Employer Findings / Quantitative Analysis

The surveyed employers, 46.2% (12) of them were small enterprises, 38.5% (10) medium, and 15.4% (4) large in size.

Sector-wise, 50% (13) operated in construction, 19.2% (5) in hospitality, 3.8% (1) in manufacturing, and 26.9% (7) in other sectors (e.g., garment, plumbing, painting, IT, automobile, etc.).

Small enterprises reported lower awareness of NVQS (25% unaware) compared to medium (10% unaware) and large enterprises are 100% aware, indicating a need for targeted outreach to smaller businesses.

Construction sector employers were more likely to hire RPL-certified workers (69.2% hired certified individuals) than hospitality (40%), reflecting sector-specific skill demands.

While formal vs. informal status was not explicitly captured, the high frequency of small enterprises suggests a significant informal sector presence, which may face challenges like high turnover (61.5% cited as a hiring issue).

Participant Profile and Inclusion Analysis

This study involved a total of 252 participants, combining both qualitative and quantitative methods to provide a comprehensive picture of participation patterns and disparities. The qualitative component included 118 participants drawn from 62 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and 9 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), while the quantitative survey engaged 134 respondents across Koshi, Gandaki, and Sudurpaschim provinces. By examining data from both sources, this analysis explores gender, caste, and ethnicity, age distribution, and region-specific differences, highlighting systemic barriers and opportunities for promoting greater inclusion.

Gender Representation and Disparities

The combined data from qualitative and quantitative sources show a marked gender imbalance. Overall, women comprised only about 26.1% of participants (35 out of 134 in the quantitative survey), with men representing the majority at 73.9%. This imbalance was also evident in the qualitative data, where female representation remained consistently lower, especially in employer interviews and certain provinces. By province, Sudurpaschim demonstrated relatively higher female participation in FGDs, women made up 66.7% of FGD participants and 31.3% of KIIs, reflecting somewhat better inclusion. Gandaki Province presented a mixed picture: while women accounted for just 9.1% of KIIs, they made up 42.9% of FGD participants, including an all-female RPL Graduate group. In contrast, Koshi Province stood out for its stark absence of female voices; both the KIIs and FGDs had 0% female participation, highlighting deeply rooted cultural and structural barriers. Among employers, the qualitative findings showed that women made up a median of 30% of the workforce, though some reported having no female staff at all. Employer FGDs in Koshi and Sudurpaschim were entirely male, whereas Gandaki had slightly better representation, with women making up around 22.2% of the employer FGD participants.

Caste and Ethnicity Representation

Analysis of caste and ethnicity revealed significant regional variations and highlighted areas of both inclusion and underrepresentation. In Sudurpaschim Province, participants from Indigenous nationalities were well-represented, comprising 62.5% of KIIs and 72.2% of FGDs. Smaller shares of Brahmin (18.8%) and Chhetri (18.8%) were also present. Koshi Province similarly had a strong presence of Indigenous nationalities, making up 41.7% of KIIs and 52.9% of FGDs, followed by Brahmins at about a third, with limited participation by Chhetri and Madhesi groups. Gandaki Province differed, with Brahmins forming a larger share of KIIs (36.4%) and FGDs (33.3%). Notably, Dalit representation was significant in Gandaki, accounting for 18.2% of KIIs and 28.6% of FGDs, especially among Potential Youth groups, while Dalit participation was largely absent in Sudurpaschim and Koshi. Madhesi representation was limited overall, appearing only in the KIIs of Koshi (12.5%) and Gandaki (13.6%), and absent in FGDs across all provinces. This pattern suggests that while Indigenous groups are relatively better represented, Dalit and Madhesi communities remain underrepresented in several regions, especially in qualitative spaces where deeper narratives are gathered.

Age Group Distribution

Across both qualitative and quantitative data, age patterns highlighted greater engagement among younger participants, particularly in Potential Youth FGDs, where most were aged between 23 and 35 years. This reflects that vocational training programs are resonating more with younger people seeking employment opportunities. Employer FGDs and KIIs, however, were typically composed of older participants aged 35–51, consistent with their professional profiles. Older women, particularly those above 35, were notably underrepresented across all data, pointing to additional barriers related to age and caregiving responsibilities that may deter their participation in vocational programs.

Barriers to Women's Participation

The qualitative findings identified several interlinked barriers that limit women's participation, which were also reflected in the quantitative responses. Approximately 12.5% of potential youth respondents cited a lack of family support, highlighting how entrenched social norms can discourage women from pursuing vocational training. Childcare responsibilities emerged as a barrier for 11.1% of respondents, disproportionately affecting women as primary caregivers. Only 2.8% of participants reported awareness of women-only training programs, indicating limited targeted outreach to address women's specific needs. These cultural perceptions of vocational sectors as male-dominated were most starkly evident in Koshi Province, where female participation was completely absent, underscoring how societal norms continue to shape participation trends.

Recommendations to Enhance GESI

Based on both qualitative and quantitative insights, the study identifies several strategies to strengthen gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) within the NVQS/RPL framework. Community awareness campaigns, suggested by 27.8% of respondents, could help improve understanding of vocational opportunities among women and marginalized groups. Employing female trainers, recommended by 16.7%, could make training spaces more comfortable and welcoming for women. Childcare support, noted by 11.1% of respondents, could directly address the practical barriers that limit women's participation. Targeted outreach is especially needed for Dalit and Madhesi communities, whose representation remains low, or absent, particularly in Koshi and Sudurpaschim. For Koshi, where cultural barriers are pronounced, women-only training spaces and partnerships with local female leaders could help shift perceptions and increase participation.

Designing flexible program schedules, such as evening or part-time sessions, would further enable women to balance household responsibilities with skills training. Collaboration with employers to encourage the hiring of women and marginalized groups and providing incentives to do so could help translate training into tangible employment outcomes.

Intersectional and Regional Insights

The combined qualitative and quantitative data illustrate that women from marginalized caste and ethnic backgrounds often face multiple, intersecting forms of exclusion. For instance, in Gandaki's Potential Youth FGDs, five out of seven participants were Dalit, but only one was female, showing that Dalit women experience compounded barriers related to both gender and caste.

Age also overlaps with these patterns: younger women were more likely to participate than older women, suggesting that age-related caregiving duties or social expectations may further limit participation. Regional disparities are evident: while Sudurpaschim shows relatively better inclusion of women, Koshi's persistent gender gap points to the need for highly localized interventions.

This analysis, combining qualitative depth and quantitative scope, demonstrates that improving inclusion in vocational training programs in Nepal requires targeted, intersectional, and region-specific strategies. Addressing cultural norms, strengthening family and community support, and designing flexible, women-friendly programs are essential to ensure that all groups, especially women and marginalized castes, can equally benefit from skills development opportunities.

| Province	Group	KIIs	FGDs
Sudurpaschim	Indigenous	62.5% (10/16)	72.2% (13/18)
	Brahmin	18.8% (3/16)	16.7% (3/18)
	Chhetri	18.8% (3/16)	11.1% (2/18)
Koshi	Indigenous	41.7% (10/24)	52.9% (9/17)
	Brahmin	33.3% (8/24)	35.3% (6/17)
	Chhetri	12.5% (3/24)	11.8% (2/17)
	Madhesi	12.5% (3/24)	0% (0/17)
Gandaki	Brahmin	36.4% (8/22)	33.3% (7/21)

	Indigenous	27.3% (6/22)	33.3% (7/21)
	Dalit	18.2% (4/22)	28.6% (6/21)
	Madhesi	13.6% (3/22)	0% (0/21)
	Chhetri	4.5% (1/22)	9.5% (2/21)

Survey Responses by Location

The quantitative analysis of this research has focused on awareness, information sources, and knowledge on NVQS/RPL processes, perceptions, and experiences of certification, advocacy, information-sharing practices, and suggestions for improvement.
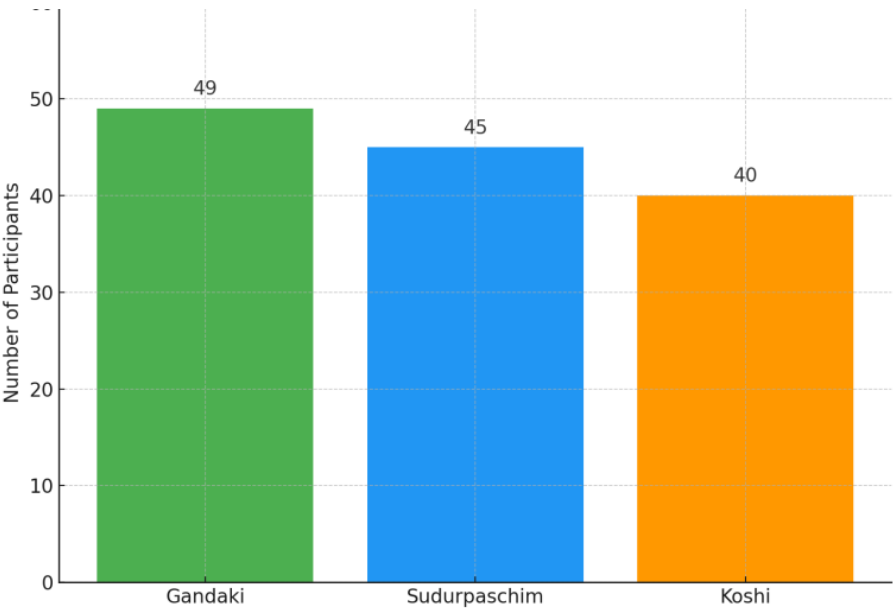
The survey includes responses from 134 participants, categorized into Potential Youths (57), RPL Graduates (51), and Employers (26), providing a comprehensive view of the vocational training landscape in Nepal. Gandaki has the highest representation, 49 (36.57%), followed by Sudurpaschim 45 (33.58%) and Koshi 40 (29.85%). A large majority, 95.52%, was employed, and 97.76% lived in urban areas. The largest age group was 30-39 years
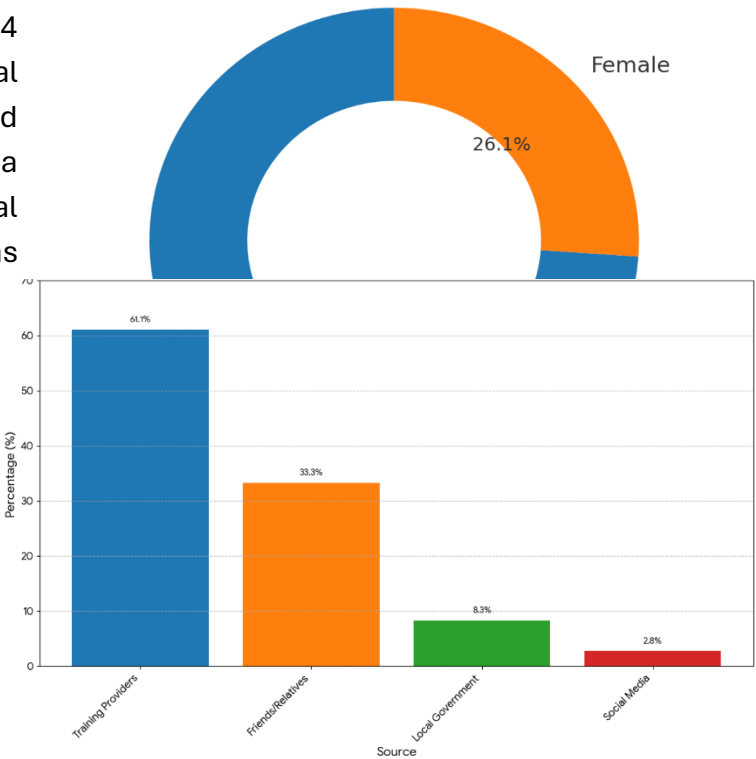
(42.54%), indicating that NVQS/RPL primarily attracts mid-career individuals. The total 73.9% male vs. 26.1% female participation highlights a gender gap in vocational training access.

Most respondents had secondary education (55.22%), suggesting NVQS/RPL appeals to those with moderate formal education.

Awareness and Information Sources

Potential Youths: Awareness of NVQS/RPL among Potential Youths is notable, with 63.2% (36 out of 57) having heard about it, primarily through training providers (61.1%), friends/relatives (33.3%), and local government (8.3%). Social media (2.8%) plays a minimal role, indicating that traditional networks and institutional channels dominate information dissemination.
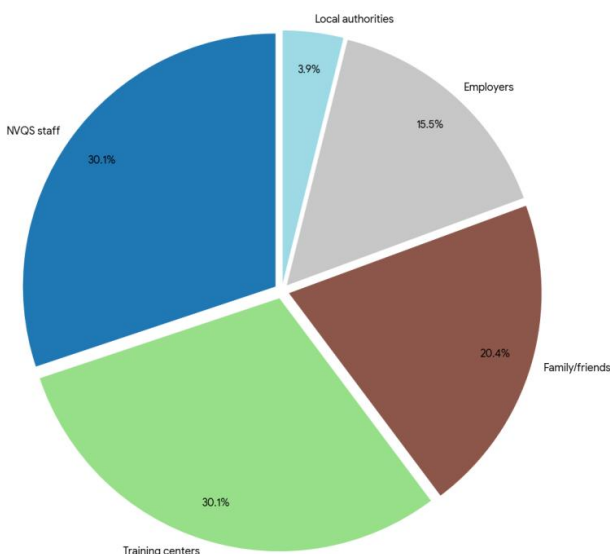

Awareness of the RPL process is slightly higher at 64.9% (37 out of 57), with 67.6% of those aware knowing how and where to apply for RPL certification.

RPL Graduates: RPL Graduates exhibit strong awareness, with 100% informed about the RPL process, primarily through NVQS staff (30.1%), training centers (30.1%), and family/friends (20.4%). Employers (15.5%) and local authorities (3.9%) are less influential, indicating that formal training networks are key information conduits for those who have completed the process.

Employers: Employers show high awareness, with 88.5% familiar with NVQS and 84.6% aware of the RPL program.
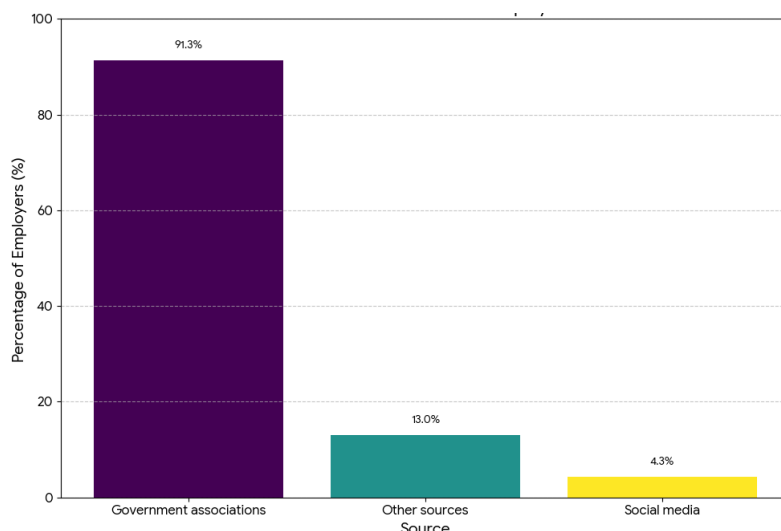
Government associations (91.3%) are the primary information source, followed by minimal contributions from social media (4.3%) and other sources (13%). This suggests that professional networks and government-led initiatives effectively reach employers, who are critical stakeholders in the vocational ecosystem.

Key Insights

The support on training providers and government associations emphasizes the importance of institutional channels in spreading awareness.

Knowledge and Understanding of NVQS/RPL Processes

Potential Youths: Among Potential Youths aware of NVQS/RPL process, 88.9% report a strong understanding of certification benefits. Knowledge of NVQS skill levels is high (77.8%), but only 60.7% fully understand how to apply for an RPL skill test, with 25% reporting only a "somewhat" understanding. This gap suggests that while awareness is strong, procedural knowledge requires further clarification.

Knowledge and Understanding of NVQS/RPL Processes Among Potential Yout

RPL Graduates' Experience with NVQS/RPL Processes
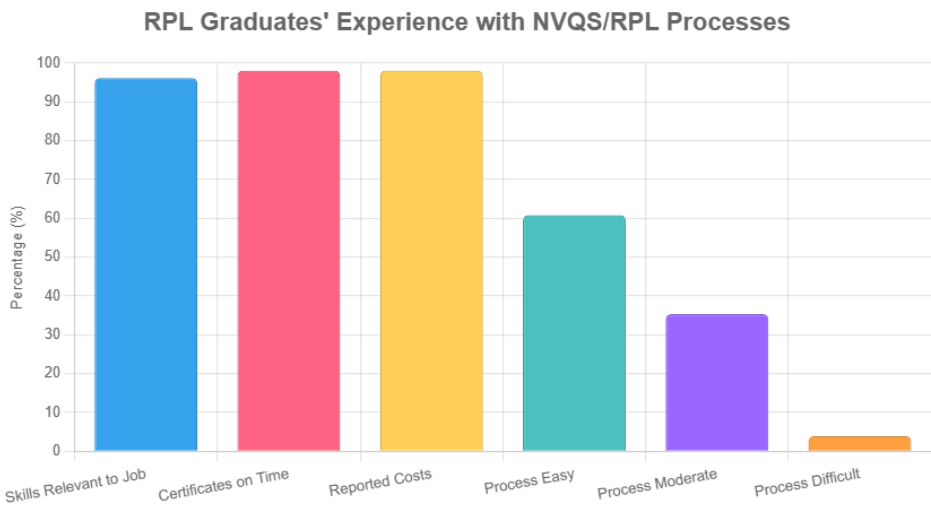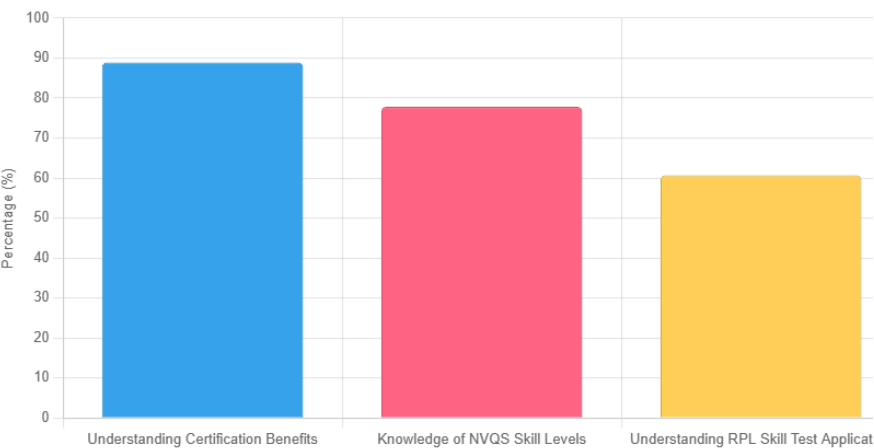
RPL Graduates: RPL Graduates show strong engagement with the process, with 96.1% finding assessed skills relevant to their job experience and 98% receiving certificates on time. However, 98% reported costs.

17

The process is rated as easy by 60.8% and moderate by 35.3%, with only 3.9% finding it difficult, indicating a generally accessible system.

Employers:

Employers are well informed, with 88.5% familiar with NVQS and 84.6% aware of RPL. They perceive RPL certified workers as better performers (92.3%), and 88.5% consider formal certification very important in hiring decisions. This high regard for certification underscores its perceived value in ensuring skill quality and productivity.

Employers' Perceptions of NVQS and RPL
- Familiar with NVQS
- Aware of RPL
- RPL Workers Better Performers
- Certification Very Important
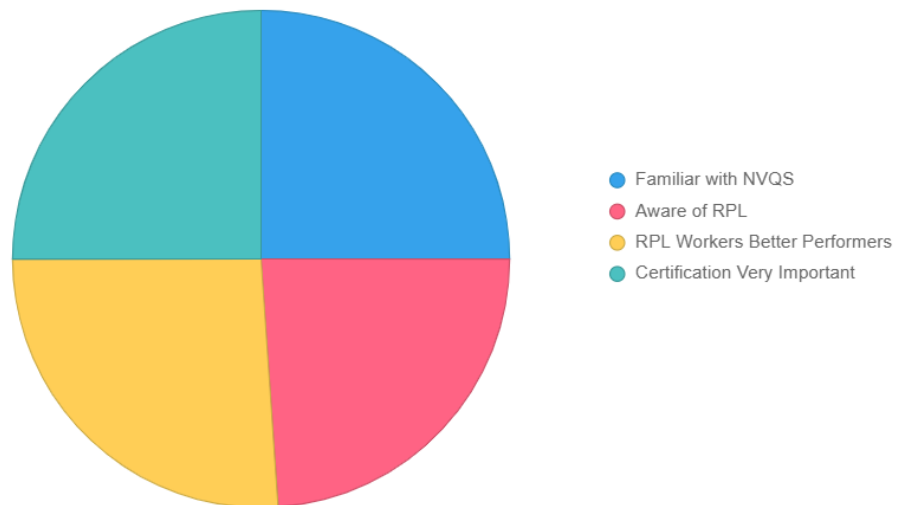
Key Insights

The strong understanding of NVQS benefits among Potential Youths and the positive experiences of RPL Graduates suggest effective communication of the system's value. However, gaps in procedural knowledge among Potential Youths and the cost barrier for RPL Graduates indicate areas for improvement.

Perceptions and Experiences of Certification

Potential Youths: Potential Youths view certification positively, with 56.1% agreeing and 14% strongly agreeing that it improves job prospects.

Benefits and Impacts of RPL Certification for Graduates
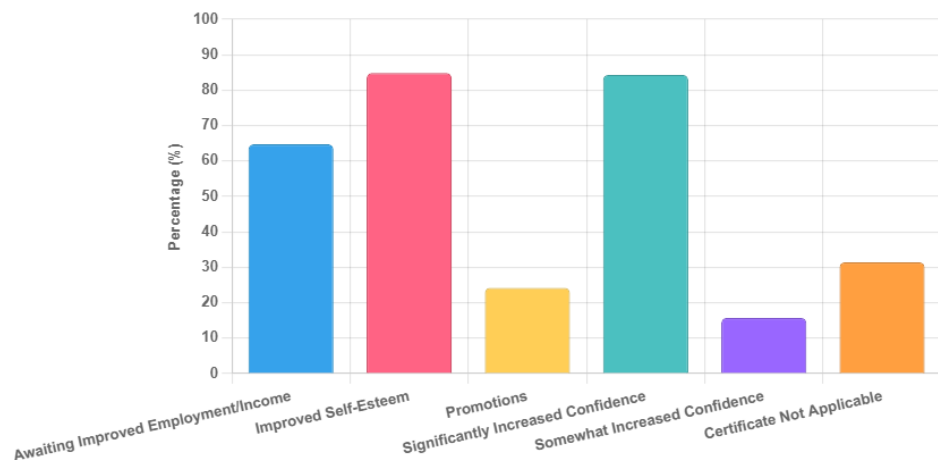
Accessibility is rated as somewhat accessible by 93%, but 3.5% find it not accessible, and another 3.5% are unsure. Motivations for seeking certification include skill recognition (87.8%), government scheme eligibility (44.9%), and better employment opportunities (36.7%). Barriers include lack of information (25%) and lack of confidence (62.5%), highlighting the need for targeted support.

RPL Graduates: RPL Graduates report significant benefits, with 64.7% waiting for improved employment or income opportunities, primarily through improved self-esteem (84.8%) and promotions (24.2%). Confidence is significantly increased for 84.3% and somewhat increased for 15.7%, reflecting a positive psychological impact. However, 31.4% reported that the certificate did not apply to their situation, possibly due to pre-existing employment.

Employers: Employers strongly value certification, with 92.3% believing NVQS enhances skills and productivity. They prioritize hiring certified workers (38.5% always, 46.2% sometimes) and prefer certified over non-certified workers (69.2%). Additionally, 61.5% have hired RPL-certified individuals,

Employers' Valuation of NVQS and RPL Certification

and 96.2% actively encourage hiring certified women workers, indicating a commitment to inclusivity.
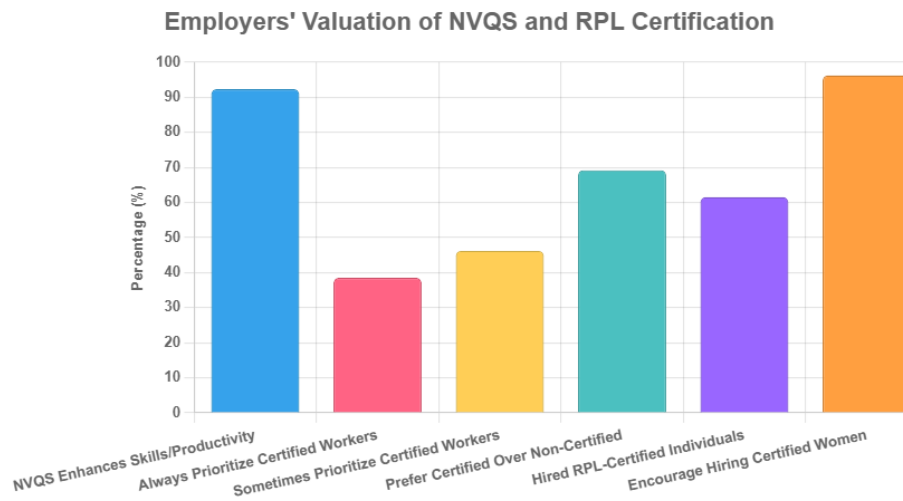
Key Insights

Certification is broadly perceived as valuable across all groups, particularly for skill recognition and employability. However, barriers like a lack of information and confidence among Potential Youths and the limited applicability for some RPL Graduates suggest the need for tailored interventions to maximize impact.

Advocacy and Information-Sharing Practices

Employers' Support for NVQS Certification

- Recommend NVQS Certification
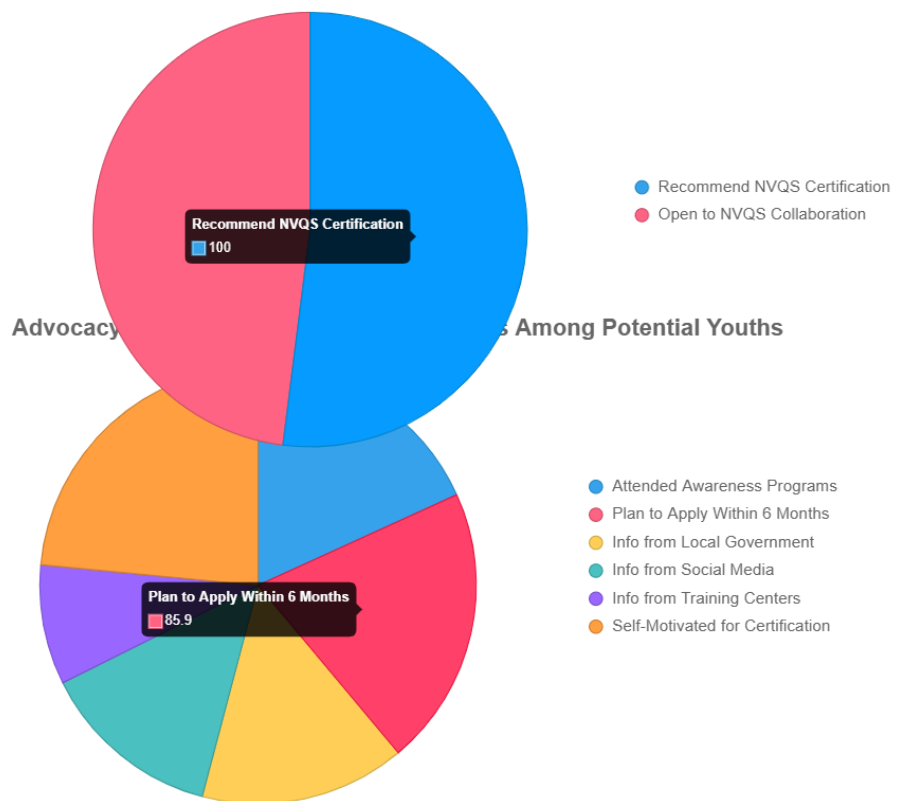- Open to NVQS Collaboration

Recommend NVQS Certification
☐ 100

Potential Youths: Potential Youths show strong advocacy potential, with 75.6% having attended NVQS/RPL awareness programs and 85.9% planning to apply for certification within

Advocacy [...] Among Potential Youths

- Attended Awareness Programs
- Plan to Apply Within 6 Months
- Info from Local Government
- Info from Social Media
- Info from Training Centers
- Self-Motivated for Certification
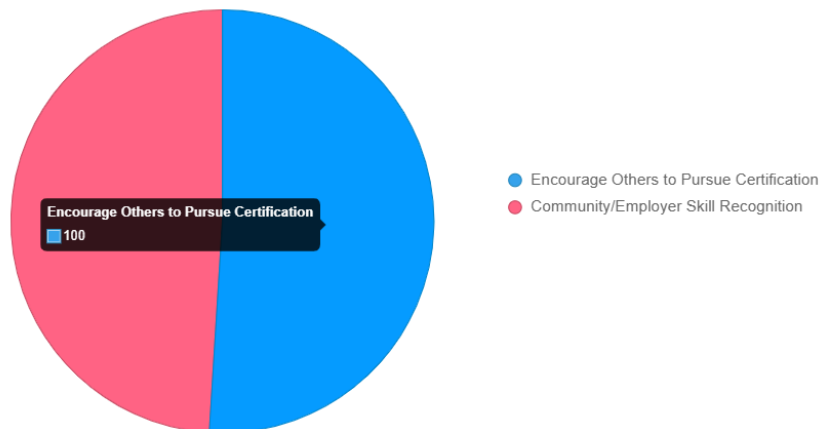
Plan to Apply Within 6 Months
☐ 85.9

six months. They rely on local government (63.2%), social media (56.1%), and training centers (36.8%) for information, indicating diverse channels for advocacy. Self-motivation drives 97.6% of certification decisions, suggesting intrinsic motivation that can be leveraged for peer-to-peer advocacy.

RPL Graduates: All RPL Graduates (100%) would encourage others to pursue certification, reflecting high satisfaction and advocacy potential. Community and employer recognition of skills post-certification is strong (96.1%), reinforcing their role as advocates. Information sources include NVQS staff and training centers, indicating that formal channels support their advocacy efforts.

Employers: Employers are highly supportive, with 100% recommending NVQS certification to others and 92.3% open to collaborating with NVQS for skills assessment, training, internships, or job placements. Their reliance on government associations for information suggests they can amplify advocacy through professional networks.

Advocacy and Recognition Among RPL Graduates

- Encourage Others to Pursue Certification
- Community/Employer Skill Recognition

Encourage Others to Pursue Certification
☐ 100

Key Insights

The strong advocacy potential across all groups, particularly among RPL Graduates and Employers, indicates a strong foundation for expanding NVQS/RPL reach. Leveraging self-motivated Potential Youths and satisfied Graduates could enhance peer-driven information sharing.

Suggestions for Improvement and Additional Insights

Potential Youths: Suggestions for encouraging women's participation include community awareness (27.8%), female trainers (16.7%), and childcare services (11.1%). Barriers to applying include a lack of information and confidence, suggesting a need for targeted awareness campaigns and confidence-building initiatives. The low usage of the Shramsansar Portal (10% have used it) and limited awareness (17.5%) indicate a need for improved promotion and accessibility.

RPL Graduates: Suggestions for women's participation mirror those of Potential Youths, emphasizing community awareness (35.3%) and female trainers (23.5%). The cost of the RPL process (98%) is a significant concern, suggesting the need for subsidies or financial support. Low portal usage (11.8% used it) and mixed feedback on its helpfulness (100% of users found it helpful, but low sample size) indicate underutilization.

Employers: Employers' willingness to collaborate with NVQS (92.3%) suggests potential for partnerships to enhance training and job placement. Low portal registration (23.1%) and job posting (33.3% of registered users) highlight the need for improved digital engagement.

Conclusion

The analysis of the numerical data shows a significant positive impact on vocational training and employability, with strong awareness and favorable perceptions among Potential Youths, RPL Graduates, and Employers. The figures show that 84.31% of RPL Graduates experience a notable boost in confidence after certification, while 88.46% of Employers consider formal certification an important factor in hiring decisions, underlining the role of RPL in improving career opportunities. However, the data also shows a clear gender imbalance (73.9% male vs. 26.1% female participation) and a strong urban skew (97.76%), highlighting the need to reach out more effectively to women and rural populations.

Suggested improvements include running community awareness campaigns, involving female trainers, and providing childcare support to encourage greater female participation. Partnering with institutional networks such as training providers and related associations is also key for spreading information. The limited use of digital platforms like the Shramsansar Portal (10–23.1% usage) points to a need for better promotion and easier access.

There is strong advocacy potential, as 100% of Graduates and Employers recommend certification, and 85.9% of Potential Youths intend to apply within the next six months. Yet, knowledge gaps about procedures among Potential Youths and the limited usefulness of certification for some Graduates suggest areas that need attention. Employers' readiness to collaborate (92.3%) creates opportunities to build partnerships that can enhance training and job placement. To fully realize the benefits of RPL, stakeholders should implement inclusive strategies like women-focused programs and rural initiatives, while also harnessing the advocacy power of satisfied Graduates and Employers to grow outreach through peer and professional networks.

Distribution of Qualitative Research Participants (Total: 118)

FGD - Sudurpaschim (18) — 15.3%
FGD - Gandaki (21) — 17.8%
KII - Koshi (24) — 20.3%
FGD - Koshi (17) — 14.4%
KII - Sudurpaschim (16) — 13.6%
KII - Gandaki (22) — 18.6%
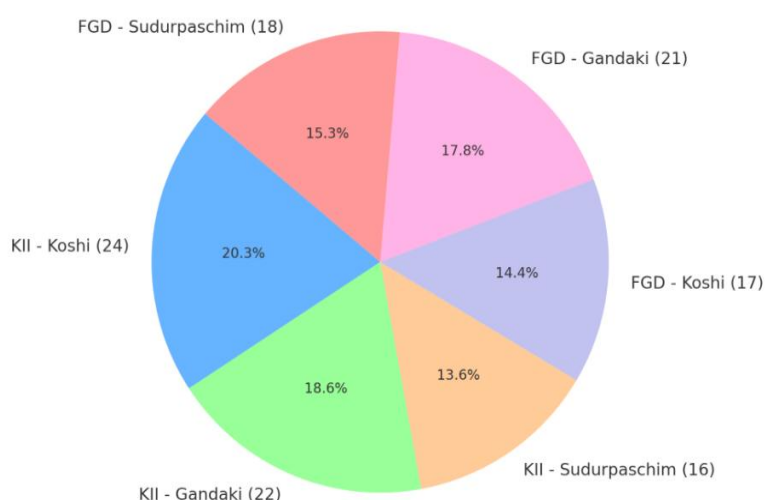
Qualitative analysis

A total of 118 respondents participated in the qualitative research, which included 62 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and 9 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). The KIIs were distributed across three provinces: 24 in Koshi, 22 in Gandaki, and 16 in Sudurpaschim. The FGDs involved a total of 56 participants, 17 from Koshi, 21 from Gandaki, and 18 from Sudurpaschim. Although the intended sample size for the qualitative research was approximately 100, the actual number of participants reached 118. This overlap indicates that at least 18 individuals who participated in the survey were also included in the qualitative research, thereby enhancing data triangulation and cross-validation of responses, which is critical for the credibility and consistency of qualitative findings.

The KIIs were conducted with a wide range of stakeholders, including potential candidates, RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning) graduates, employers, and representatives from the private sector, members of various associations, government officials, elected representatives, and representatives from training providers affiliated with both government and private test centers.

The FGDs were organized into three diverse categories: one FGD in each province with potential youth, one with RPL graduates, and one with employers, resulting in three FGDs per province.

The word cloud

The word cloud from the MAXQDA analysis points to key themes of employment, training, and workforce development, with prominent terms like "employment," "workers," "training," "skills," "certification," and "education" showing a focus on improving job skills.

It also features "RPL", "qualifications," "opportunities," and "challenges," pointing to efforts in recognizing skills and addressing barriers, especially for "women," "youth," and "minorities." Collaborative terms like "employer," "stakeholders," and "institutions," along with "awareness," "engagement," "support," and "benefits," suggest a multi-stakeholder approach to boost access and outcomes. Practical terms ("jobs," "wages," "hiring") and strategic ones ("policy," "framework," "system") reflect a balance of immediate job creation and long-term structural improvements, indicating a holistic vision for workforce growth.

Details of thematic analysis

To guide the data collection process, five fixed thematic areas were defined prior to fieldwork. These thematic areas shaped the design of the survey tools, as well as the structure of KIIs and FGDs, ensuring a systematic approach to capturing the perspectives of three key respondent groups: potential youth, RPL graduates, and employers from both government and non-government institutions.

Theme: Initial Awareness and Information Sources

The National Vocational Qualification System (NVQS) and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) process provide certification for traditional skills, enhancing the qualifications of workers such as plumbers, painters, tile workers, refrigeration technicians, mobile technicians, masons, garment welders, and automobile mechanics.

Key Points from respondents- Sudurpaschim

The Construction Professional Employer Association in Sudurpaschim Province received information from the Ministry of Social Development regarding the NVQS/RPL program. They received a formal letter from the Ministry of Social Development inviting participation in the program. The association informed its workforce about the program, enabling many workers to participate in skill test examinations. However, some workers in this sector still lack detailed information about the program. The association noted that the frequency of skill tests should be increased to accommodate more participants.

Individual Experiences

Painter's Testimony: An individual from Tikapur who completed Level 1 training at a government training center was contacted by their trainer to apply for Level 2 certification through RPL, based on their work experience. After passing the Level 2 skill test, they became trainers. They plan to pursue Level 3 certification in the future to qualify as a contractor.

Focal Person's Account: A focal person for the NVQS, Ensure and Quality project employed at the Ministry of Social Development in the provincial government, learned about the NVQS/RPL program during their MPhil research, and later on from the inception. They have been involved with the program since its inception and are fully aware of its processes.

Experiences in Gandaki Province

Garment Workers in Palungtar: Women working in the garment industry in Gandaki Gorkha Palungtar were informed by their employer about the NVQS/RPL skill test, including details

on timing and application procedures. Some workers have already obtained Level 1 certification and, after learning about the Level 2 test, participated and achieved positive results.

Youth in Pokhara: Potential youth in Pokhara participated in focus group discussions (FGDs) initially; they shared negative experiences due to a lack of information about skill tests, particularly among women. The Samaj Ghar club president later provided details about the skill test, enabling participation.

HAAN Gandaki: The Ministry of Social Development invited HAAN Gandaki to a meeting, where they were informed about the NVQS/RPL program.

Awareness in Urban vs. Rural Areas

The NVQS/RPL program is relatively well-known in urban areas but less so in rural regions. The Ministry of Social Development and representatives from the Swiss contact have been key sources of information, organizing meetings to share details about the program. Some individuals reported learning about NVQS/RPL for the first time through these interactions.

Experiences of Female Laborers

A female laborer with 8–10 years of experience as a mason expressed interest in upgrading her skills after learning that another woman, the wife of a team mason, had taken the skill test. She and her friends are eager to participate in future tests but noted that their contractor has not yet provided information about upcoming opportunities. They expressed willingness to participate if given the opportunity.

Role of Technical Schools

In all three provinces Koshi, Gandaki and Sudurpaschim where the research was conducted, Technical Schools coordinating attracting individuals from various districts following vocational training and certification.

General Observations

The NVQS/RPL process certifies skills acquired prior learning or work experience. Certification validates workers' expertise, enhancing their employability. However, challenges remain, including limited awareness among certain groups, particularly women and rural workers, and the need for more frequent skill test opportunities.

Theme: Awareness and Perception of NVQS/RPL Processes

The second thematic area evaluates the knowledge and understanding of the NVQS/RPL processes among respondents, focusing on their awareness, perceptions, and experiences with the certification system.

Key Insights from Respondents

Awareness and Appreciation: Respondents expressed joy upon learning that the NVQS/RPL process certifies their work experience, allowing them to obtain formal recognition without mandatory training. The Ministry of Social Development informs relevant staff when application forms for skill tests are available and these staff shares the information with other potential candidates. Respondents now understand that NVQS/RPL is a certification process for skills they already have.

Certification Impact: Previously, workers lacked formal certification despite their skills. The NVQS/RPL process has introduced a system to provide certificates, validating their expertise. This has increased self-confidence, salary, post, and respect among workers. However, few respondents noted that despite passing skill tests, they remain in the same job roles, companies, and salary levels, with certificates having limited immediate impact on career progression.

Hiring Practices: Employers share differences in hiring practices based on size of company/industry. Mostly employer wish to hire certified staffs but few shares that recruiting certified staff can be challenging due to concerns about turnover, as certified workers may seek better opportunities.

Limited Awareness: Many individuals remain unaware that certification can get based on experience without formal training. This lack of awareness is particularly evident at the local level, where information dissemination is still in its early stages. Associations and local bodies are seen as key channels for sharing information about NVQS/RPL.

Institutional Perspectives

Private Training Centers: Private training center, after meeting with the NVQS team, became a test center. The center is well-informed about the RPL system, regularly receiving updates and participating in workshops. They view the RPL model as suitable and impactful for skill certification.

Government Collaboration: The NVQS/RPL program operates under the Ministry of Education at the federal level and the Ministry of Social Development at the provincial level.

Respondents suggested that collaboration with the Ministry of Labor and Employment is also need to think to enhance the program's effectiveness.

Program Structure and Impact

Certification Process: NVQS/RPL provides certification for individuals with existing skills in various sectors but no formal credentials. The program offers multiple certification levels (e.g., Level 1, Level 2, and Level 3), supporting career progression, job opportunities, income growth, and confidence building. The process is evidence-based and builds on earlier initiatives like the Skill for Employment program in Nepal.

Mindset Shift: Traditionally, skill tests were associated with formal training. The RPL process has changed this perception by recognizing prior learning and experience as valid for certification. This shift has broken longstanding mindsets, encouraging workers getting certification.

Challenges: Despite its benefits, the RPL process is not widely known, particularly among laborers who could benefit most. The certification process is perceived as complex, and real laborers often lack access to information. Respondents emphasized that local-level institutions and associations are best positioned to disseminate information effectively.

Time and Scalability: The NVQS/RPL system is a long-term initiative. Workers progress from Level 1 to higher levels over time, and widespread adoption in communities will require sustained effort. The increased dissemination of information has led to more RPL skill tests, though the program's full impact will take time to materialize.

Sector-Specific Needs

Hospitality Sector: Respondents highlighted the hospitality sector's need for skilled workers, emphasizing the importance of RPL in addressing this demand. Certification through RPL can help meet industry requirements for qualified personnel.

Individual Experiences

Certified Workers: Some respondents who passed Level 2 skill tests reported no immediate changes in their job roles or salaries, with certificates providing personal satisfaction but limited professional impact. Others who passed Level 1 are awaiting opportunities to take the Level 2 test, leveraging their extensive work experience. Some has transferred their job labor to trainer after certificate.

Ongoing Efforts: The NVQS/RPL program, while previously integrated within the Council for Technical Education and Vocational Training (CTEVT) in a different form, is now gaining attraction through broader awareness campaigns and structured implementation.

Theme: Value and Impact of Certification

The third thematic area explores respondents' perceptions and experiences regarding certification through NVQS/RPL process. The focus is on the significance of certification, its impact on employability, confidence, and social recognition, as well as challenges in its adoption.

Key Perceptions of Certification

Essential Documentation: Respondents view the certificate as a fundamental document that validates their skills. While colleagues and local communities may recognize their expertise, the certificate serves as a formal credential when seeking opportunities elsewhere, including abroad. It provides assurance for future job prospects and simplifies professional interactions with unfamiliar parties, particularly in sectors like automotive and construction.

Enhanced Confidence and Career Mobility: Certification significantly boosts self-confidence. For instance, a respondent who transitioned from a general worker to a trainer after obtaining a certificate expressed immense pride and unexpected joy. The certificate offers security, enabling workers to secure new jobs if forced to leave their current employer or to pursue opportunities overseas. It also facilitates career progression, such as moving from laborer to mason or trainer roles.

Social Recognition and Respect: Certification lifts workers' status in their communities, reducing discrimination and skepticism about their abilities. Certified individuals face fewer questions about their work competence. Respondents noted that certificates confer respect and dignity, aligning with their skills and encouragement a sense of pride. For example, a automobile RPL graduate from Biratnagar stated, "I don't need to speak; the certificate speaks for who I am."

Legal and Professional Credibility: The certificate acts as a legal document, providing protection in disputes. One respondent from Kanchanpur Mahendranagar recounted defending him against accusations of faulty work in house wiring by presenting their certificate in front of administrator, which served as proof of their expertise. Additionally, certification is increasingly required for government and local-level contracts, particularly in the construction sector in Koshi Province, where local authorities request certificates for tenders.

Sector-Specific Impacts

Addressing Skill Gaps: Industries, such as hospitality and construction, face a shortage of skilled workers, while training centers struggle to place their graduates. RPL certification

bridges this gap by recognizing experienced workers, enabling employers to hire certified individuals with confidence. In Itahari, certified workers in painting and plumbing find jobs more easily, and they share the value of certificates in specific trades.

Construction Sector Benefits: In Koshi Province, the construction sector benefits significantly from RPL certification. Certified workers gain a competitive advantage in securing contracts, as local authorities prioritize certified individuals for tenders, reducing tensions and enhancing professional credibility.

Hospitality Sector Needs: The hospitality sector requires skilled workers to meet industry demands. RPL certification helps address this need by certifying experienced individuals, aligning their skills with market requirements, and reducing youth unemployment.

Challenges and Observations

Limited Participation in Testing: In Damak, many individuals attend counseling sessions but do not proceed to take skill tests, indicating a gap between awareness and action. This suggests a need for greater encouragement and accessibility to testing opportunities.

Resistance from Long-Term Workers: Workers with over 20 years of experience often see little value in certification, believing their reputation is sufficient. However, respondents emphasized that without a certificate, even experienced workers are perceived as laborers in new environments, underscoring the importance of formal recognition.

Employer Concerns: Employers face challenges when hiring certified workers, as they may demand higher wages or leave for better opportunities. Conversely, hiring uncertified workers risks machine damage or inefficiencies due to a lack of proven skills. When employers sought certified workers from training centers, they often found that listed individuals lacked confidence or practical ability, sharing the real experience of inconsistencies in certification outcomes.

Unique Features of NVQS/RPL

Credit Transfer: A feature of NVQS is its credit transfer system, which allows workers to build on their certifications across levels, supporting long-term career development.

Breaking Traditional Mindsets: The RPL process challenges the notion that only formal training leads to certification. By recognizing prior learning and experience, it opens opportunities for laborers to gain formal recognition, transforming their professional identity (e.g., from laborer to mason).

Individual Experiences

Career and Personal Growth: Respondents shared transformative experiences, such as opening their shops or gaining the confidence to work independently after certification. One worker in Biratnagar compared certification to a driver's license, emphasizing its role in validating skills and enhancing self-esteem.

Community and Social Media Role: Community networks, training center graduates, and social media play a crucial role in disseminating information about certification opportunities. Local dealers and contractors also serve as key channels for sharing information.

Security and Accountability: Certification provides a safety for workers. One respondent in the automobile sector in Koshi noted that if they make a mistake, their certificate supports their credibility. It also serves as a professional license, ensuring security and accountability in their work.

Broader Implications

Community Ownership: Certification raises a sense of ownership within communities, as certified workers are recognized as skilled professionals, reducing stigma and enhancing local workforce pride.

Long-Term Impact: The NVQS/RPL process opens "many paths" for workers, as a respondent in Gandaki expressed by the phrase "Certificate le dherai bato kholchha" (the certificate opens many ways). It supports career advancement, international mobility, and economic opportunities, positioning certified workers as valuable assets in their industries.

Theme: Promoting Awareness and Participation

The fourth thematic area examines advocacy efforts and information-sharing practices related to the NVQS/ RPL process. This theme shows how individuals, employers, associations, and institutions promote the program, encourage participation in skill tests, and address challenges in disseminating information.

Advocacy Efforts by Individuals and Employers

Post-Certification Advocacy: Certified workers actively advocate for the NVQS/RPL program, encouraging others to participate in skill tests. For example, an individual in a construction company in Dhangadhi with over 200 workers successfully motivated at least 40 colleagues to take the test, emphasizing the importance of certification. Certified workers share their experiences with friends and peers, generating excitement and increasing participation in upcoming tests.

Employer Responsibility: Employers recognize their role in sharing information about NVQS/RPL and supporting workers to get certification. Some employers proactively inform their workforce about skill test opportunities, helping them understand the benefits of certification for career growth and job security.

Personal Impact: Certification increases worker's confidence, motivating them to advocate for the program. Respondents noted that RPL certification enhances respect within Nepal and facilitates opportunities for foreign employment, as it serves as a recognized credential abroad. Counseling sessions associated with the program also educate workers about workplace safety measures.

Role of Associations and Organizations

Labor Associations: Labor associations play a significant role in disseminating information about skill tests. They assist workers in filling out application forms and encourage participation. One respondent reported helping more workers prepare for Level 2 tests at Birtamod, demonstrating the impact of organized advocacy efforts. Associations have increased participation rates, with the number of RPL test participants rising from 25 to over 100 due to effective information sharing an experience of Tikapur Kailali.

Private Sector Engagement: In Gandaki Province, the Federation of Nepalese Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FNCCI) closely coordinates with the NVQS/RPL program to promote certification. Private sector entities, such as those in the automobile sector, view RPL as an official process to certify skilled workers, enhancing workforce credibility.

HAAN Advocacy: Hotel Association of Nepal HAAN in Koshi and Gandaki actively promotes the NVQS/RPL skill tests, encouraging workers to get certification and sharing its benefits for professional development.

Sector-Specific Insights

Hotel Sector: The hospitality sector faces challenges in hiring skilled workers, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the sector supports on-the-job training (OJT) for trainees, creating pathways for skill development and certification through RPL. The need for skilled workers stresses the importance of advocacy to ensure workers are aware of certification opportunities.

Construction Sector: Local authorities increasingly require certificates for tasks such as house map approvals in Koshi, reinforcing the need for certification. Advocacy efforts ensure workers are informed about these requirements, enabling them to meet local standards and secure contracts.

Challenges in Information Sharing

Private Sector Hesitation: Some private sector employers are unwilling to promote RPL certification due to concerns that certified workers may demand higher salaries or leave for better opportunities. This mindset limits advocacy efforts in certain industries.

Local-Level Awareness: Local authorities often lack understanding of the NVQS/RPL program, which delays the effective dissemination.

Complex Application Process: The RPL application process poses challenges, as forms are sometimes rejected for minor issues, such as unclear photographs or incomplete recommendation letters from local authorities. For example, a form was rejected because the applicant's ears were not visible in photographs at Itahari last time, causing frustration among laborers and discouraging participation.

Impact of Information Sharing

Increased Participation: Effective information dissemination has significantly increased participation in RPL skill tests. Regular advocacy efforts, combined with periods of intensive information sharing, have led to a notable rise in test-takers, demonstrating the effectiveness of coordinated campaigns.

Motivation and Opportunities: Skill certificates motivate workers by validating their expertise and opening new opportunities. Respondents emphasized that certification simplifies foreign employment processes, enhances professional respect, and provides a competitive edge in sectors like construction and hospitality.

Youth and Foreign Employment: The younger generation shows strong interest in foreign employment, and certification through RPL prepares them for international opportunities by providing recognized credentials. Advocacy efforts target this group to ensure they understand the value of certification.

Broader Implications

Community Engagement: Labor associations and employers play a critical role in bridging the information gap, particularly at the local level. By helping workers navigate the application process and promoting the benefits of certification, they foster greater community engagement with the NVQS/RPL program.

Long-Term Benefits: Advocacy efforts contribute to the program's success by increasing awareness and participation. Certification not only enhances workers' employability but also supports industries in meeting the demand for skilled labor, ultimately benefiting the broader economy.

Theme: Enhancing the NVQS/RPL Program

The fifth thematic area gathers suggestions for improving the NVQS/RPL processes, along with additional insights from respondents. These recommendations focus on increasing accessibility, improving information dissemination, and addressing systemic challenges to make the program more effective and inclusive.

Key Suggestions for Improvement

Flexible RPL Process: The RPL process, particularly for Level 1, should be more flexible to accommodate workers with varying levels of experience and education. This would encourage greater participation, especially among laborers with limited formal education.

Welcoming Approach for Private Sector: A private sector respondent in Biratnagar shared that the program should adopt a welcoming rather than forceful approach to engage the private sector. This would reduce resistance from employers concerned about certified workers demanding higher salaries.

Ensure Qualified Certification: Certificates should be awarded only to capable candidates who demonstrate the required skills, ensuring the credibility of the RPL process.

Efficient Form-Filling Process: The form-filling period is critical, and dedicated NVQS/? Staff should lead efforts to assist workers in completing applications. Testing centers should receive support for at least one month during this period to handle the volume of applications. Many forms are rejected due to minor errors. Dedicated personnel at the local level should provide strong support to address these issues.

Accessible Examination System: The skill test system should be made more accessible, with tests conducted every six months instead of annually to allow more workers to participate. The examination language should be simplified and available in both Nepali and local languages to accommodate workers with limited literacy. Pictorial questions could help address language barriers, such as using local terms like 'Thokiya' for 'hammer' in Tharu-speaking communities.

Enhanced Information Dissemination: Information sharing is the foundation of the program's success. Suggestions include:

- Visiting industries and workstations to directly inform workers about RPL benefits and opportunities.

- Collaborating with labor associations, contractors, and employers to disseminate information effectively.

- Targeting rural and remote areas to ensure broader reach, as awareness remains low outside urban centers.

- Using alternative mediums, such as community boards or local government listings, for workers without internet access or literacy skills.

Training Materials and Skilled Testers: Training centers should provide relevant materials during skill tests to support candidates. Additionally, skill test assessors must be highly skilled and from relevant sectors to ensure fair and accurate evaluations.

Increased Frequency and Accessibility of Tests: Skill tests should be conducted more frequently and in more locations, such as Dhangadhi and Baglung, where test centers are currently unavailable. The program should decentralize to district and local levels to improve access.

Financial Support: Local governments should cover skill test fees to reduce financial barriers for labor. The funding provided to test centers should be increased to reflect current economic conditions, enabling them to manage tests effectively.

Mandatory Certification: Local governments should mandate certification for certain tasks, such as construction contracts or house map approvals, to increase the perceived value of certificates. Additionally, policies could prioritize certified workers for employment opportunities, encouraging more laborers to participate.

Curriculum Development: A dedicated curriculum for RPL skill tests should be developed, incorporating modern occupational requirements for a camera technician. Questions should be updated to reflect current industry standards, as some are considered outdated.

Support for Illiterate Workers: Laborers with low education levels or no formal literacy face challenges in filling out forms and understanding the test process. Dedicated counselors should provide empathetic and accessible support, emphasizing that "the test is for us, not for others." Community campaigns should highlight the importance of certification to motivate participation.

Collaboration across Government Levels: All three tiers of government, federal, provincial, and local should prioritize the RPL program and work collaboratively with labor organizations and employers. Local governments, in particular, should initiate certification drives for long-term workers, especially those with 15–20 years of experience in sectors like construction.

Additional Insights

Time Constraints for Workers: Laborers often struggle to allocate time for form-filling, counseling, and testing due to work commitments. A more flexible schedule or optional programs could address this issue.

Value of Certification: Certificates enhance workers' professional identity and employability. For example, a respondent who transitioned from a laborer to a formally recognized mason after certification noted that it allows them to confidently present themselves as skilled professionals, even outside their local area. Certificates also facilitate international employment opportunities.

Advocacy by Beneficiaries: Certified workers, including those who have become employers, are strong advocates for the RPL program. One respondent in Dhangadhi, who returned from 10 years of work in Korea, encouraged 38 workers to get certification, with one-third succeed. Such individuals are eager to collaborate with NVQS for advocacy efforts.

Challenges in Form Submission: Many potential candidates, particularly those with low education levels, face difficulties with the form-filling process. Dedicated support staff and simplified procedures could mitigate this issue.

Post-Certification Benefits: Respondents suggested that institutions, such as local governments, and districts should establish wage rates based on certification levels (e.g., Level 1, Level 2, Level 3) to incentivize workers to pursue higher certifications. This would enhance the perceived value of certificates.

Infrastructure and Policy Gaps: The NVQS framework lacks sufficient infrastructure, such as specialized courses for trades like masonry or welding technology. Respondents suggested learning from countries like Pakistan to develop a strong technical and vocational education system. A sustainable federal policy is needed to support the NVQS/RPL framework.

Broader Implications

Systemic Support: The NVQS/RPL program requires stronger coordination with local governments, as well as collaboration with private training centers and labor organizations. **Motivating Participation**: Convincing workers of the importance of certification remains challenging, particularly for those with low literacy or limited access to information. Large-scale publicity, empathetic counseling, and community-level campaigns are critical to overcoming these barriers.

Language Adaptation for RPL Skill Test: To make the National Vocational Qualification System (NVQS) and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) skill tests more accessible, questions should use simple, familiar terms in Nepali and local languages, addressing language barriers for workers with limited literacy.

Sustainability: By making certification mandatory in certain sectors, increasing test frequency, and providing financial and logistical support, the NVQS/RPL program can achieve greater impact, benefiting both workers and industries.

Conclusion

The analysis of qualitative data shows that the National Vocational Qualification System (NVQS) and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) program have had a transformative impact on workers' professional identity, employability, and confidence. Certification has been particularly meaningful for workers who previously lacked formal recognition despite years of experience, validating their skills and providing new opportunities, including foreign employment and higher-level roles.

Awareness of the NVQS/RPL process has grown, especially through advocacy by certified workers, labor associations, employers, and government bodies. Yet gaps remain, particularly among women, rural laborers, and those with low literacy, who often struggle to access or complete the certification process. Challenges like complex forms, limited quotas, and infrequent skill tests further constrain participation.

The program has shifted perceptions, recognizing informal learning alongside formal training, and has begun to break traditional mindsets. Respondents see certification not only as documentation of skills but as a source of dignity, legal protection, and a practical tool to secure contracts, better wages, or overseas jobs. In sectors like construction and hospitality, certification addresses skill gaps, benefits employers, and enhances professional standards.

To increase impact, respondents suggest measures such as simplifying language in tests, decentralizing test centers to rural areas, increasing test frequency, and ensuring better collaboration across government levels and with private training centers. Supporting illiterate workers through counseling, improving information dissemination, and adapting the process to modern occupations were also emphasized.

Ultimately, NVQS/RPL certification opens multiple pathways: it strengthens workers' confidence, fosters respect in society, and aligns Nepal's workforce with industry needs. While systemic challenges remain, sustained advocacy, inclusive strategies, and targeted

reforms can ensure the program truly benefits marginalized groups, supports lifelong learning, and contributes to national economic growth. As one respondent aptly noted, "The certificate opens many ways," highlighting the program's promise for the future.

Triangulation

This is a synthesis of quantitative and qualitative findings on the NVQS/RPL process in Nepal, focusing on awareness, perceptions, experiences, advocacy, and improvement suggestions. Data from 134 survey respondents (57 Potential Youths, 51 RPL Graduates, and 26 Employers) and 118 qualitative participants (62 Key Informant Interviews, 9 Focus Group Discussions with 56 participants) across Koshi, Gandaki, and Sudurpaschim provinces are triangulated to provide a comprehensive understanding.

Awareness and Information Sources

Quantitative Findings: Awareness of NVQS/RPL is notable among Potential Youths (63.2%), primarily through training providers (61.1%) and friends/relatives (33.3%). RPL Graduates (100%) and Employers (88.5% for NVQS, 84.6% for RPL) show high awareness.

Qualitative Insights: Awareness is higher in urban areas, driven by the Ministry of Social Development and Swiss contact. Rural areas and women lag due to limited outreach. Labor associations and training centers are pivotal in information dissemination, as seen in Sudurpaschim's Construction Professional Employer Association and Gandaki's garment workers.

Triangulation: Both datasets confirm institutional channels (training providers, government associations) dominate information dissemination, while social media is underutilized. Qualitative data highlights rural-urban differences and gender gaps, complementing quantitative findings of strong urban skew (97.76%) and male dominance (73.9%).

Knowledge, Understanding, and Gap

Quantitative Findings: Potential Youths show strong understanding of NVQS benefits (88.9%) but moderate procedural knowledge (60.7% fully understand RPL application). RPL Graduates find the process accessible (60.8% easy, 35.3% moderate) and relevant (96.1%). Employers value certification's impact on skills/productivity (92.3%). There is still a gap in making understanding the value of certification for the potential candidates for RPL test.

Qualitative Insights: Respondents appreciate RPL for certifying prior experience without mandatory training, boosting confidence and employability. However, procedural complexity and limited local awareness hinder participation, especially among laborers.

Triangulation: Both datasets confirm strong appreciation of certification benefits but highlight gaps in procedural clarity among Potential Youths and limited local awareness, particularly in rural areas, as a barrier.

Perceptions and Experiences

Quantitative Findings: Potential Youths view certification as improving job prospects (70.1%), with barriers like lack of information (25%) and confidence (62.5%). RPL Graduates report enhanced self-esteem (84.8%) and employment opportunities (64.7%). Employers prioritize certified workers (69.2%) and see them as more productive (92.3%).

Qualitative Insights: Certification validates skills, enhances confidence, and provides legal credibility. It facilitates career mobility, for example laborer to trainer and social respect, but has limited immediate impact for some due to pre-existing employment.

Triangulation: Both datasets confirm certification's positive impact on confidence, employability, and social recognition. Qualitative data adds depth, highlighting legal and social benefits and challenges, like limited immediate job role changes.

Advocacy and Information Sharing

Quantitative Findings: Potential Youths (85.9%) plan to apply for certification, driven by self-motivation (97.6%). RPL Graduates (100%) and Employers (100%) advocate for NVQS/RPL. Low Shramsansar Portal usage (10–23.1%) indicates limited digital engagement.

Qualitative Insights: Certified workers and associations actively promote RPL, increasing participation for an example from 25 to over 100 test-takers in Tikapur. Employers and labor associations bridge information gaps but found few hesitations of private sector and complex forms hinder advocacy.

Triangulation: Both datasets highlight strong advocacy potential, particularly among Graduates and Employers. Qualitative insights reveal practical advocacy efforts and barriers like complex applications, complementing low digital tool usage in quantitative data.

Suggestions for Improvement

Quantitative Findings: Suggestions include community awareness (27.8% Youths, 35.3% Graduates), female trainers (16.7% Youths, 23.5% Graduates), and childcare (11.1% Youths, 11.8% Graduates). Low portal usage and costs (98% Graduates) are concerns.

Qualitative Insights: Recommendations include simplifying forms, increasing test frequency, decentralizing test centers, and using local languages. Financial support, mandatory certification, and rural outreach are emphasized to enhance inclusivity.

Triangulation: Both datasets align on improving accessibility for women and rural workers through awareness campaigns, female trainers, and childcare. Qualitative data adds specific solutions addressing quantitative concerns about costs and low digital engagement.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Nepal Vocational Qualifications System Phase II (NVQS P-II) has significantly advanced skill recognition, enhancing employability, confidence, and social respect for workers, particularly in urban areas.

The mixed-methods study, involving 134 survey respondents and 118 qualitative participants across Koshi, Gandaki, and Sudurpaschim provinces, shows strong awareness among RPL graduates (100%) and employers (88.5%), though potential youths (63.2%) show moderate procedural knowledge gaps that need to be addressed.

Certification is highly valued for validating skills, boosting self-esteem (84.8% of graduates), and improving job prospects (70.1% of youths). However, challenges persist, including limited rural outreach, gender disparities (73.9% male participation), and low Shramsansar Portal usage (10–23.1%). Complex application processes, only annual skill tests, and costs (98% of graduates) hinder participation, particularly for women and low-literacy workers. Advocacy by graduates and employers is healthy, with 100% recommending certification, yet private sector hesitation and local awareness gaps limit scalability.

Recommendations

To enhance NVQS/RPL impact, there should be more awareness of the skill test mobilizing test centers to rural areas and increase test frequency to biannually, using simplified Nepali and local language questions to accommodate low-literacy workers. It need to implement targeted awareness campaigns through labor associations and community networks to reach women and marginalized groups, incorporating female trainers and childcare support.

It needs work to simplify the application processes to reduce rejections for those who have to travel long distances from hilly districts to the town, bearing the high cost.

At least the mandate certification for sectors will boost demand. To enhance Shramsansar Portal promotion and usability to improve digital engagement is recommended. The collaboration across government levels and private sectors is needed to align with modern occupational needs, ensuring inclusivity and sustainability. These measures will support to full the knowledge gap and boost Nepal's vocational ecosystem, empowering workers and supporting economic growth.

Targeted communication & outreach strategy

Audience segmentation:

- Potential youths: emphasize skill certification benefits (better jobs, dignity); channels: association, peer groups, local government, social media, and local youth clubs.
- RPL graduates: empower as peer champions; channels: community groups, local events, and peer groups, a role model can be created.
- Employers: highlight business benefits; channels: employer associations, newsletters
- Women & marginalized groups: address barriers directly; channels: female trainers, women's groups, and child care support.

Key messages:

- "Certification transforms your skills into recognized qualifications."
- "Certified workers are more employable, earn better, and get respect."
- "Certification supports personal and family economic growth and local development."

Channels:

- Social media (short videos, success stories, Facebook posts)
- Peer groups, associations for rural reach
- Information through training centers and ward offices
- Community meetings & peer-led discussions

Leverage digital tools:

- Promote and simplify the Shramsansar Portal (including training on its use)
- Share success stories of certified workers on digital platforms

Recommendations by stakeholders

a) For Government policymakers (NSTB, MoEST)
- Increase frequency of skill tests (biannual instead of annual)

- Simplify application and test procedures, including local language and pictorial questions

- Provide subsidies to cover transportation and residential costs for low-income rural workers who need to travel to participate from remote districts to the towns.

- Case studies: In the context of the NVQS/RPL process, studying successful case studies of change-makers and role models provides valuable insights into effective implementation. These real-world examples, whether individuals or institutions, highlight practical strategies for aligning skill assessment with market demands, adopting collaboration, and overcoming systemic challenges. Such cases reveal the importance of validating prior learning, promoting employability, and focusing on inclusive empowerment. By learning from these proven approaches, implementers can better navigate obstacles, use resources efficiently, and replicate success, ultimately strengthening the impact of NVQS and RPL programs.

b) For Employers & Industry Associations
- Collaborate in awareness campaigns and share success stories of certified workers

- Encourage the preferential hiring of certified workers

- Establish internal systems to help workers apply for NVQS/RPL

- Address turnover fears by linking certification to retention incentives

c) For ESCs and Training Providers
- Provide clear, serious counseling and support during application/form-filling

- Train female trainers to promote women's participation

- Regularly organize orientation workshops in local communities

- Help organize peer learning networks of RPL graduates

d) For Local governments
- Integrate NVQS/RPL promotion into local employment plans

- Conduct local awareness campaigns, especially in rural and marginalized areas

- Support separation dedicated person through the local budget during the kill test.

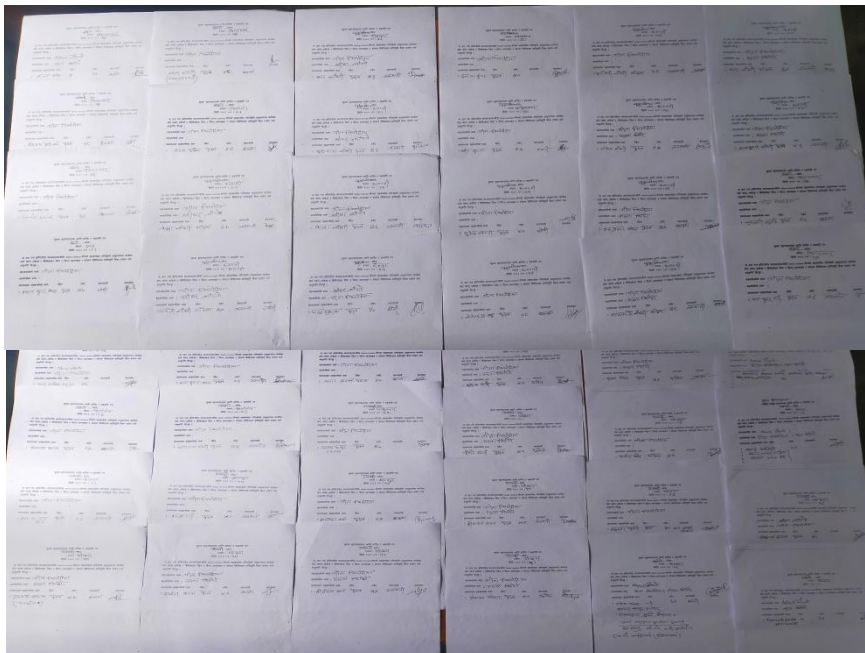- Start to make certification mandatory for municipal-level contracts.

Annexes

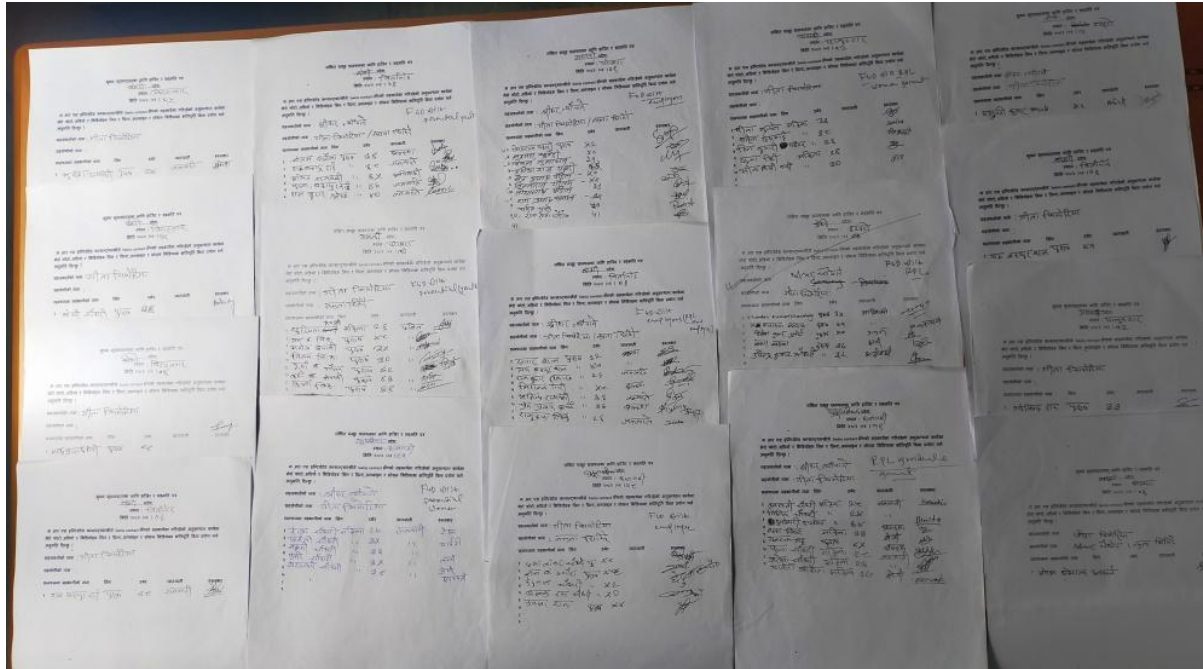## Annex I - questionnaire for survey

Annex II - questionnaire for FGDs/KIIs

Questions for the KIIs and FGDs_NVQS 202!

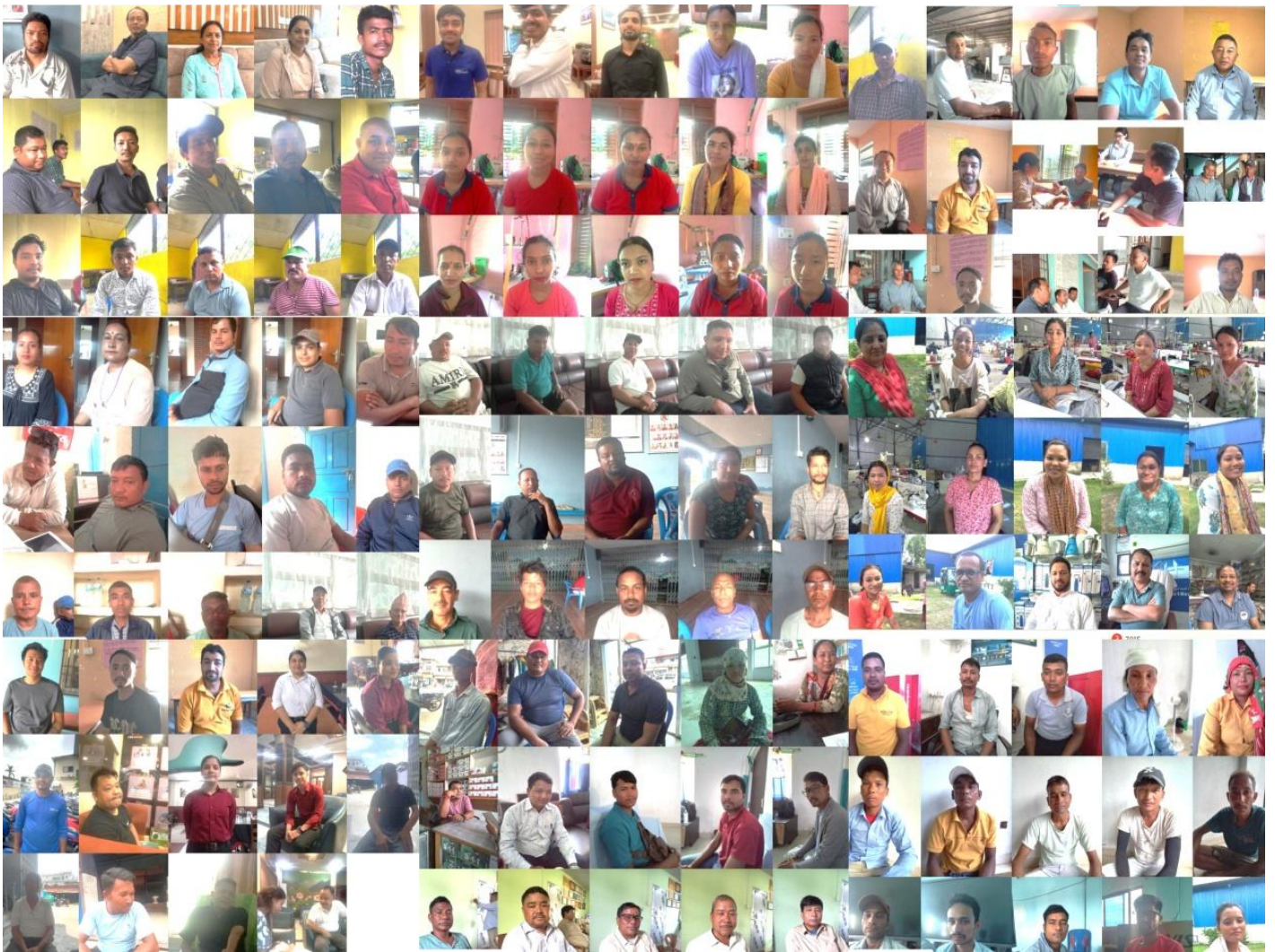
NVQS FGD and KII list -all three province

Annex III - Photographs related to research

Consent forms

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