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Bridging the Gap: Curriculum Reform, Systemic Barriers, and Student Voices on Exam Readiness in Samoa

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Abstract
This mixed-methods study examines academic performance and tertiary readiness among Year 12 and 13 students in Samoa's Foundation Accounting and Economics programme. Analysing data from 60 students, including exam results, surveys, and lecturer insights, the research identifies a significant performance gap: Year 13 students outperformed Year 12 students in national exams, a disparity largely attributed to a compressed syllabus under Samoa's transition to a four-year secondary system, which has left Year 12 students with weaker foundational and writing skills. Beyond this structural divide, both groups face substantial socio-environmental barriers, most notably overwhelming family responsibilities and 'time poverty,' alongside practical issues such as electricity outages and limited study resources. Student feedback further highlights demand for improved teaching quality, resource access, and academic support. The study concludes that student outcomes are shaped by an interconnected system of structural, pedagogical, and socio-environmental gaps, necessitating a holistic intervention strategy that integrates curriculum reform, institutional accountability, and community engagement to enhance exam performance and tertiary readiness in Samoa's evolving educational landscape.

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Introduction

Assessing the impact of structural reform

Educational systems worldwide engage in periodic reform to align with national development goals, improve efficacy, and address systemic inefficiencies. In Samoa, the secondary education structure, long modelled on the New Zealand framework encompassing Years 7 to 13, underwent one significant transformation. Spearheaded by the Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture (MESC), a strategic decision was made to compress the secondary program from five to four years. This restructuring aimed to address documented structural issues and streamline the pathway to tertiary education and the workforce. The transition was implemented with Year 10 students sitting the Samoa School Certificate in 2022 as a terminal checkpoint, culminating in the historic 2024 academic year. In 2024, both the final cohort of Year 13 students and the first cohort of Year 12 students under the new four-year model sat for the Samoa Secondary Leaving Certificate (SSLC) national examination. Simultaneously bringing an end to the Year 13 level.

Such a fundamental systemic shift represents a critical juncture in Samoa's educational landscape. While policy changes are designed with long-term improvements in mind, their immediate impact on the student cohorts directly affected must be rigorously evaluated. The concurrent examination of two distinct year groups - one completing the traditional five-year arc and the other completing a condensed four-year program presents a unique, natural experiment. It allows for a direct comparative

analysis of student outcomes at the point of exit, offering invaluable insights into the practical implications of the reform during its implementation phase. The performance, preparedness, and perceptions of these students are not merely academic metrics; they are vital indicators of the reform's initial efficacy and of the potential challenges requiring mitigation.

Comparing performance, preparation, and perceptions

This research paper is positioned within this context of change. Its primary objective is to conduct a focused assessment and comparison of the 2024 SSLC examination performance between Year 12 and Year 13 students. However, moving beyond a simple score comparison, the study adopts a holistic perspective. It recognizes that examination results are the product of a complex interplay of factors, including preparation strategies, available resources, personal well-being, and external socio-environmental conditions. Therefore, this investigation expands its scope to analyze the ecosystems surrounding student performance. It seeks to answer several interrelated questions: How did the aggregate scores and performance ratings of Year 12 and Year 13 students differ? What study resources and preparation methods did each cohort employ, and how did they perceive the effectiveness of these methods? What were their levels of satisfaction with their results and their self-assessed performance against expectations? Finally, what key challenges and enabling factors did students identify as most impacting their academic journey during this high-stakes period?

To answer these questions, this study engaged a sample of 60 students currently enrolled in the Foundation Accounting and Economics programme at the National University of Samoa (NUS), all of whom sat for the SSLC in 2024. This purposive sample provides a focused lens on students who have successfully transitioned to tertiary study, allowing for retrospective reflection on their secondary culminating experience. The cohort comprised 32 former Year 12 students and 28 former Year 13 students. Data was gathered across multiple dimensions, creating a multi-faceted dataset for analysis.

Key findings and implications

The analysis presented in this paper is structured to first establish the performance differential through a direct comparison of SSLC results (score bands and performance categories). It then delves into the preparatory landscape, mapping the resources utilized by students. Subsequently, it explores the affective domain by examining student satisfaction and self-perception of performance. Finally, it investigates the contextual and personal factors that served as barriers or enablers, including study challenges, infrastructural limitations, and perceived influences like family support and teaching quality.

Preliminary findings reveal a pronounced disparity in outcomes. Year 13 students consistently outperformed Year 12 students, securing a greater proportion of higher score bands and 'Well' and 'Excellent' performance ratings. This performance gap is mirrored in the affective data, with Year 13 students reporting higher levels of satisfaction and more positive self-assessments against their own expectations. Interestingly, resource utilization patterns were largely similar across cohorts, with overwhelming reliance on traditional materials like school notes and past papers, and minimal use of online information. The most significant universal challenges cited were time management, stress, and family responsibilities, highlighting shared systemic and socio-cultural pressures. Notably, family support and the quality of teaching were overwhelmingly identified as the most powerful positive influences on academic performance. This paper argues that these findings are crucial for policymakers, educators, and support services in Samoa. They provide an empirical baseline understanding of how different student cohorts experienced a major structural reform. The identified performance and perception gaps underscore the need for targeted academic and pastoral interventions for students in the new four-year stream, particularly around accelerated curriculum delivery, expectation management, and enhanced support systems. By documenting the lived experience of this transition, this study aims to contribute to a more nuanced, evidence-informed approach to implementing and refining Samoa's reformed secondary education system, ensuring it fulfills its promise for future cohorts

Literature Review

Educational reform

Globally, educational reform is a dynamic and often contested process, driven by imperatives of national development, economic competitiveness, and the pursuit of equity (Brent, 2025; Li, Xue & Guo, 2025) [4]. In the Pacific region, educational systems, many of which were inherited from colonial administrations, are engaged in continuous efforts to indigenize curricula, improve relevance, and enhance learning outcomes (Hunter, 2024; Teaero, 2010) [13]. Samoa's recent structural reform, transitioning its secondary education from a five-year to a four-year model, represents a significant and deliberate intervention within this broader landscape. This reform seeks to address systemic inefficiencies and streamline pathways, echoing similar compression reforms debated or implemented in other jurisdictions (International Monetary Fund, Asia and Pacific Dept. 2025) [14]. The unique confluence in 2024, where the final five-year cohort (Year 13) and the first four-year cohort (Year 12) sat the same terminal examination - the Samoa Secondary Leaving Certificate (SSLC) - creates a rare natural experiment in educational policy evaluation (MEC, 2025) [20].

This literature review establishes the theoretical and empirical foundation for the present study, which conducts a comparative analysis of the 2024 SSLC outcomes, preparation strategies, and student experiences of these two cohorts. It is structured across four interconnected themes: (1) the theoretical underpinnings of educational change and its impact, (2) the determinants of academic performance in high-stakes examinations, (3) the socio-cultural and resource-based ecosystems of learning, particularly in Pacific contexts, and (4) the affective dimensions of student experience during educational transitions.

Theory and reality of educational structural reform

Educational reform is rarely a simple technical adjustment; it is a complex socio-political process that interacts with existing structures, cultures, and the lived experiences of those it affects (OECD, 2025) [27]. Policy-driven structural changes, such as altering the duration of a schooling cycle, are typically justified by goals of efficiency, improved student flow, and better alignment with tertiary entry requirements (Ooi, 2025; Pawar, 2025) [28,29]. However, the

implementation phase is critical, often marked by "implementation dips" where outcomes temporarily decline as systems and stakeholders adjust (Holm, Kringelum & Anand, 2025) [11].

Research on curriculum compression or accelerated pathways presents mixed findings. While some studies suggest that well-supported accelerated programs can benefit highly motivated students without compromising depth (Roza, Daqiqil, *et al*., 2025). Others caution that simply condensing timeframes without concomitant adjustments in pedagogy, resource allocation, and student support can exacerbate pressure, surface-level learning, and inequities (Qolamani, Kaya, *et al*., 2025). The Samoan reform sits within this tension. The concurrent assessment of two models provides a direct opportunity to examine the immediate effects of compression on a full cohort, not just a select group (Melgarejo, Pando, *et al*., 2025) [21]. This aligns with a pragmatic evaluation approach that seeks to understand "what works, for whom, and under what circumstances" in the messy reality of policy enactment (Hudson, Olin-Scheller & Wegner, 2025) [12].

Furthermore, the Samoan context requires an understanding of reform in small island developing states (SIDS), where resource constraints, geographic challenges, and strong communal ties significantly shape educational delivery and outcomes (Mudaliar, Leach & Barbara, 2025; Crossley & Sprague, 2014) [24,6]. Reforms in such contexts must navigate unique logistical challenges and deeply embedded cultural values, making the study of their initial impact particularly valuable for both national and regional policy learning (Vlados & Chatzinikolaou, 2025).

Determinants of academic performance in high-stakes examinations

Student performance in terminal secondary examinations is the product of a multifaceted interplay of factors. Traditional models often distinguish between student-level inputs (ability, motivation), school-level factors (resources, teaching quality), and home-background characteristics (socio-economic status, parental support) (Mensah, Amponsah, *et al*., 2024; Zhang, 2025) [22].

At the individual level, preparation strategies are paramount. The heavy reliance on school notes and past papers observed in the Samoan data is consistent with global studies highlighting the importance of direct curriculum alignment and practice with exam formats (Sithole, 2024). However, the minimal use of online information and collaborative study groups (like study groups) in Samoa suggests a specific study culture and possibly limited digital access or literacy, a point explored further below (Ndibalema, 2025) [25]. The effectiveness of resources is not absolute but is mediated by students' self-regulated learning capabilities, particularly time management, the most cited challenge in this study (Warmoes, Decabooter, Struyven & Consuegra, 2025). Shareefa, Moosa, *et al*. (2025) said self-regulation and mindfulness identify time management as a crucial metacognitive skill, and deficits in this area are consistently linked to lower academic achievement and increased stress.

At the institutional level, teaching quality emerges repeatedly as a critical variable. Anagaw, Ashagrie, Iyasu, and Fentie (2024) [1] emphasised that meta-analyses identify teacher expertise and instructional quality as among the most powerful influences on student achievement. The positive perception of teaching quality by Samoan students as a key enabler underscore this. The curriculum density resulting from structural compression is another crucial factor. If the same breadth of content is expected to be mastered in less time, cognitive load increases, potentially disadvantaging students who require more time for mastery or who lack foundational skills (Karlen, Hertel, *et al*., 2025) [15]. The performance gap between Year 13 and Year 12 cohorts may be partially attributable to this "curriculum squeeze," where the condensed cohort had less time for spaced repetition, remediation, and deep conceptual engagement. Bellei, Contreras, *et al*. (2025) [2] elaborated that adaptive and repetitive responses harness improvement.

Learning ecosystem: Socio-cultural and resource contexts in the Pacific

A student's academic journey is embedded within a broader ecosystem (Bhardwaj, Zhang, Tan, & Pandey, 2025) [3]. In Samoa and many Pacific nations, this ecosystem is profoundly shaped by familial and communal obligations. The finding that family duties were a major barrier to study (55% of participants) and yet family support was the strongest positive influence, reflects a core duality. Pacific educational research consistently emphasizes the centrality of the *aiga* (family) as both a source of immense motivational pressure to succeed and a network of practical and emotional support (Cooper, 2025) [5]. Success is often viewed collectively, but this can conflict with the individual, time-intensive demands of Western-style academic study. According to Figueira and Fullman (2025) [8], the cultural context is essential for interpreting challenges such as time management and stress, which are not merely personal failings but often manifestations of competing socio-cultural demands.

Resource access constitutes another layer of the ecosystem. The reported barriers - lack of study space, electricity outages, and limited textbook access - highlight infrastructural challenges common in SIDS (Heinz & Swennen, 2025; Popa, 2024) [10,30]. The near-total reliance on physical, school-provided resources (notes, past papers) over digital ones aligns with studies on the digital divide in Pacific education, where internet access may be unreliable, expensive, or not integrated into pedagogical practice (OECD, 2025; Vaa, 2016) [27]. This contrasts with educational discourses in developed nations that increasingly assume digital ubiquity. Furthermore, the identification of extracurricular commitments as a strongly negative influence is noteworthy. While often promoted for holistic development, in a context of compressed academic time and high familial expectations, such activities may be perceived as detrimental distractions from the primary goal of examination success (Liasidou, 2025; Suaalii, & Auvaa, 2024) [18].

Satisfaction, self-assessment, and the experience of transition

Beyond cognitive outcomes, the success of an educational reform must also consider its impact on students' affective and psychological well-being (Monib, Qazi &Apong, 2025) [23]. Student satisfaction and self-assessed performance are key indicators of this domain (Zhang, 2025). The significant gap between Year 12 and Year 13 cohorts in both satisfaction and positive self-assessment is a critical finding. Social comparison theory (Monib, Qazi &Apong, 2025) [23] suggests that students likely gauge their success

against that of their peers and internalized expectations. The Year 12 cohort, aware they are the pioneering - and potentially under-prepared - group in a new system, may have entered the exam with lower self-efficacy (OECD (2025) [27], which can negatively impact both performance and post-hoc evaluation.

The high levels of stress reported (42%) are symptomatic of a high-stakes examination culture, a phenomenon documented worldwide (Kim, Schüssler-Fiorenza, *et al*., 2024) [16]. However, this stress may be amplified during a period of systemic uncertainty and transition. The "unknowns" associated with a new examination structure for Year 12, coupled with possible anxieties about being compared to the established Year 13 cohort, can create a distinct psychological burden (Wessa, Sandner, *et al*., 2024). This aligns with research on "transition stress," where changes in educational stages or structures are recognized as significant stressors for adolescents (O'Malley, Linz, Engert, & Singer, 2024) [26]. The lower satisfaction among Year 12 students, even when controlling for objective performance, suggests a possible "reform penalty" on student morale - a factor with implications for ongoing motivation and tertiary transition (Tuck, Wiley, *et al*., 2023).

Positioning the present study

The existing literature robustly establishes that educational reforms are complex, that performance is multi-determined, that local ecosystems matter profoundly, and that student affect is a crucial outcome (Wong & Liu, 2022). However, several gaps are evident that this study on Samoa's reform directly addresses.

First, there is a scarcity of detailed, empirical studies examining the immediate, cohort-level impact of structural compression reforms in the Pacific Island context. Much of the literature is either theoretical, focused on long-term outcomes, or derived from very different educational settings (Liu & Zhang, 2025) [19]. Second, while factors like family influence and resource access are acknowledged, few studies triangulate these with actual performance data and affective responses from students navigating the same assessment under different preparation timelines (Dor, 2024) [7]. Third, the unique Samoan natural experiment of 2024 provides an unparalleled opportunity to move beyond speculation about the effects of shortening a school cycle to direct, comparative measurement.

This study, therefore, contributes by providing an empirical, holistic baseline analysis at a critical policy juncture. It connects the dots between structural policy (the four-year reform), intermediate factors (preparation, resources, challenges), and multi-dimensional outcomes (scores, ratings, satisfaction, self-assessment). By grounding its investigation in the specific socio-cultural and resource reality of Samoa (Mudaliar, Leach, & Barbara, 2025) [24], it offers evidence that is both locally relevant for MESC policymakers and contributes to a broader international understanding of how educational reforms (Hansson, 2025) [9] manifest in the lived experiences of students in SIDS. The findings show that structural change cannot be assessed by metrics of efficiency alone. It must be evaluated through the lens of student performance, preparedness, and well-being, within the unique ecosystem that shapes them.

Methodology

Research design

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. This approach involved first collecting and analyzing quantitative data from a student survey to establish patterns and relationships regarding exam preparation, performance, and perceptions. The qualitative data were gathered through open-ended survey responses and semi-structured interviews with university lecturers. The purpose of this sequential design was to use the qualitative findings to explain, elaborate on, and provide a deeper contextual understanding of the initial quantitative results, particularly the observed performance disparity between Year 12 and Year 13 students.

Population and sampling

The target population was the Year 12 and Year 13 students enrolled in the Foundation Accounting and Economics programme at the National University of Samoa (NUS) who had sat the Samoa Senior Secondary Leaving Certificate (SSLC) in 2024. The total population size for these two cohorts was 120 students.

A purposive sample of 60 students was selected, representing 50% of the target population. The sample was stratified by year level to ensure representation, resulting in 32 Year 12 students and 28 Year 13 students. This non-probability sampling method was chosen for its practicality and to ensure access to participants with the specific experience under investigation (SSLC exam takers).

A purposive sample of two experienced Economics lecturers from the same Foundation programme was recruited. Their selection was based on their direct experience teaching both Year 12 and Year 13 cohorts, providing an expert, tertiary-level perspective on student preparedness and performance.

Data collection methods and instruments

Data were collected using two primary instruments. A self-administered questionnaire was distributed to the 60 student participants. The survey comprised four sections: demographic information, exam preparation, perceptions and self-assessment, and semi-structured lecturer interviews. Interviews with lecturers were conducted to explore the differences between Year 12 and Year 13 students' strengths and weaknesses.

Data analysis

Quantitative analysis, data from the closed-ended survey questions were processed and analyzed using descriptive statistics. Frequencies and percentages were calculated to describe the distribution of responses for all variables, including resource use, performance bands, satisfaction levels, and perceived challenges. Comparative analysis (e.g., Year 12 vs. Year 13) was central to the analysis, with results visualized in graphs and charts.

Qualitative analysis applied the thematic analysis. The open-ended survey responses from 29 students (14 Year 12, 15 Year 13) were coded inductively. Initial codes were grouped into categories, then synthesized into overarching themes like quality of teaching, access to resources, systemic challenges, and so forth.

Lecturer interviews were analyzed using a combination of inductive and deductive coding. Transcripts were coded for key insights related to curriculum impact, skill gaps, and explanatory factors for performance differences. These codes were then organized into coherent thematic narratives that provided expert commentary on the quantitative trends.

Ethical considerations

The study adhered to standard ethical guidelines. Informed consent was obtained from all participants (students and lecturers) before data collection. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, assured of the voluntary nature of their participation, and guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality in the reporting of results. Data were stored securely and used solely for the purposes of this research.

Limitations

The study acknowledges certain limitations. The use of a purposive, non-random sample from a single university programme limits the generalizability of the findings to the wider population of Samoan secondary students. The reliance on self-reported data for exam performance and challenges may be subject to recall bias or social desirability bias. The lecturers' perspective, while valuable, is limited to two individuals from the economics discipline. Future research could benefit from a larger, randomized sample, direct access to exam scores, and the inclusion of secondary school teacher perspectives.

Finding Analysis

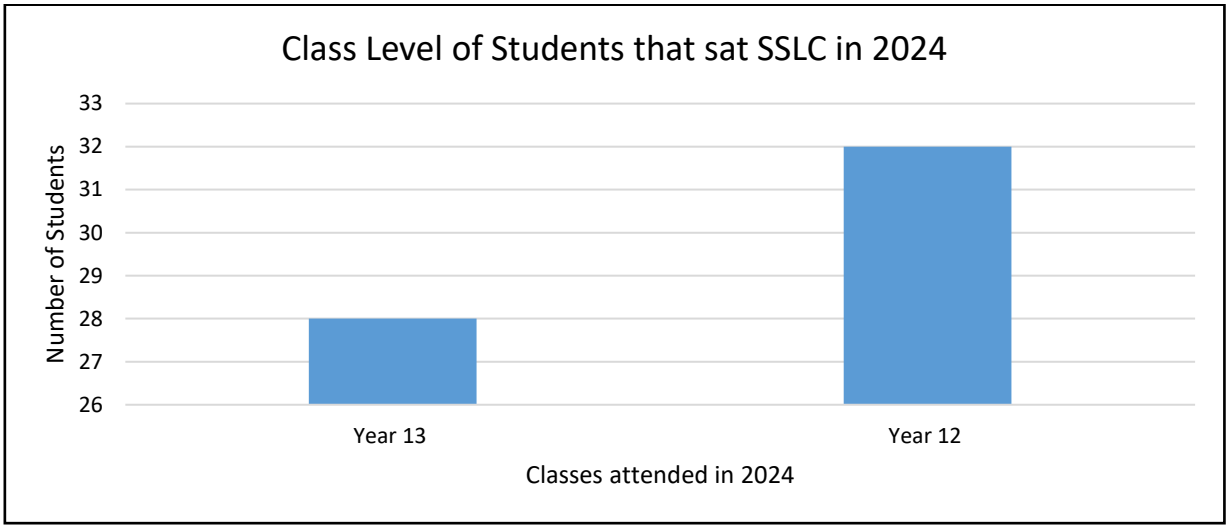

Fig 1: Demographic information

A sample of 60 students enrolled in the Foundation Accounting and Economics programme at the National University of Samoa (NUS) participated in this research. All participants had taken the Samoa Senior Secondary Leaving Certificate (SSLC) in 2024. Their year-level distribution at the time of the examination is presented in Graph 1: 32 were Year 12 students, and 28 were Year 13 students. This sample represents a portion of the 120 total Year 12 and 13 students currently enrolled in the Foundation Accounting and Economics programme

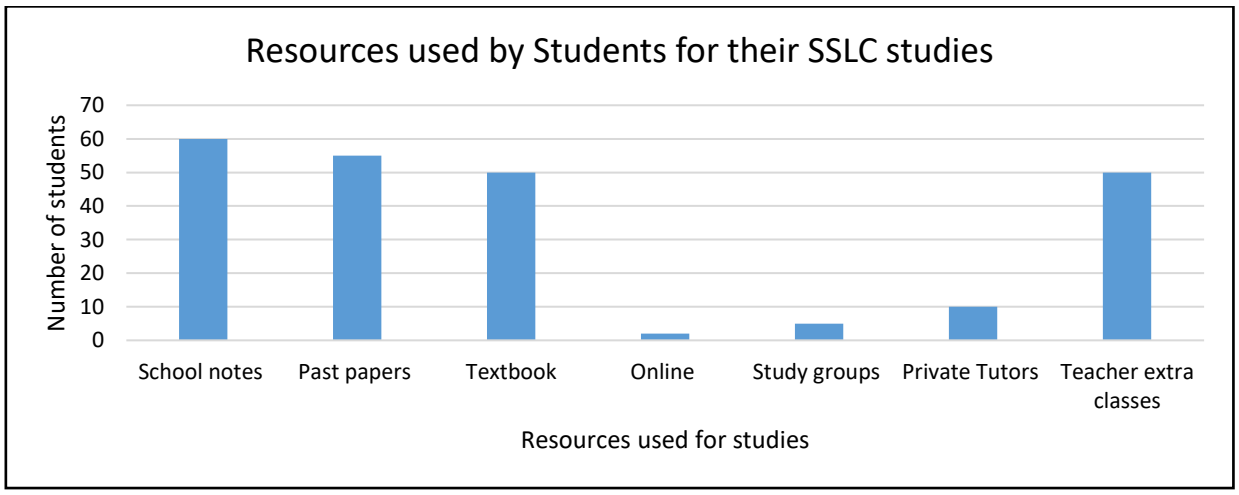

Fig 2: Research participants used resources to prepare for their SSLC exam in 2024

Graph 2 presents the study resources used by the 60 research participants to prepare for their SSLC national examination in 2024. School notes were universally utilized by all students. Past exam papers were the next most popular resource, used by 55 students, followed closely by textbooks and extra classes, each used by 50 students. The use of private tutors was less common, reported by 10 students, while study groups were used by only 5 students. Notably, online information was the least-used resource, utilized by just 2 students.

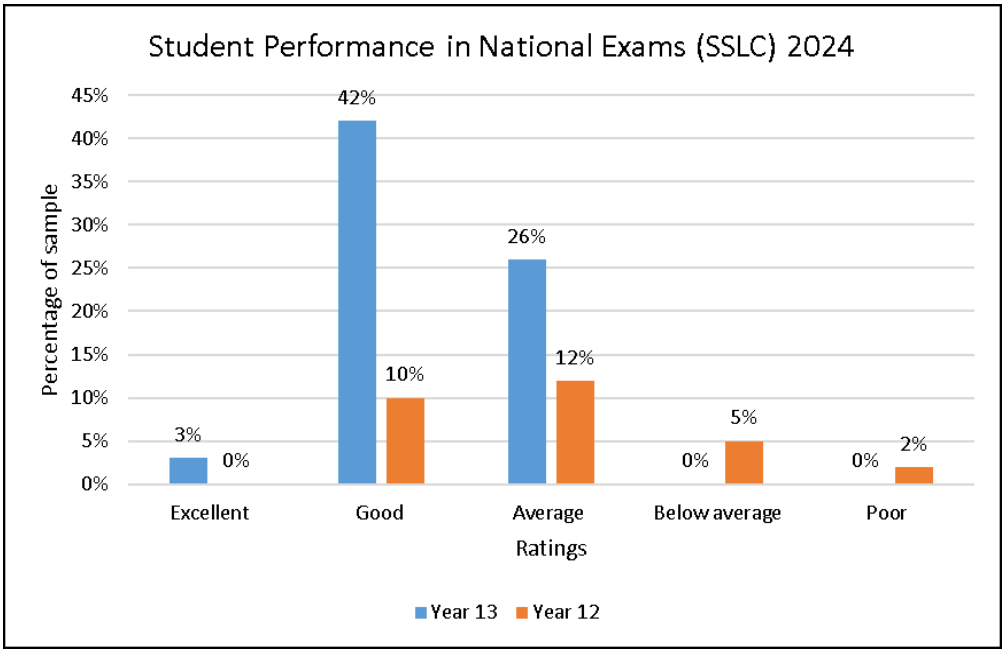

Fig 3: Comparing SSLC Year 12 with Year 13 students' national examination rating

Graph 3 presents the distribution of exam performance in the SSLC national examination in 2024 by the Year 12 and Year 13 students. For Year 13, 42 percent of students performed well, 26 percent achieved an average rating, and 3 percent attained a result in the excellent category. In comparison, Year 12 results show a different distribution: 10 percent of students performed well, 12 percent were rated average, five percent were below average, and two percent performed poorly in the national examination.

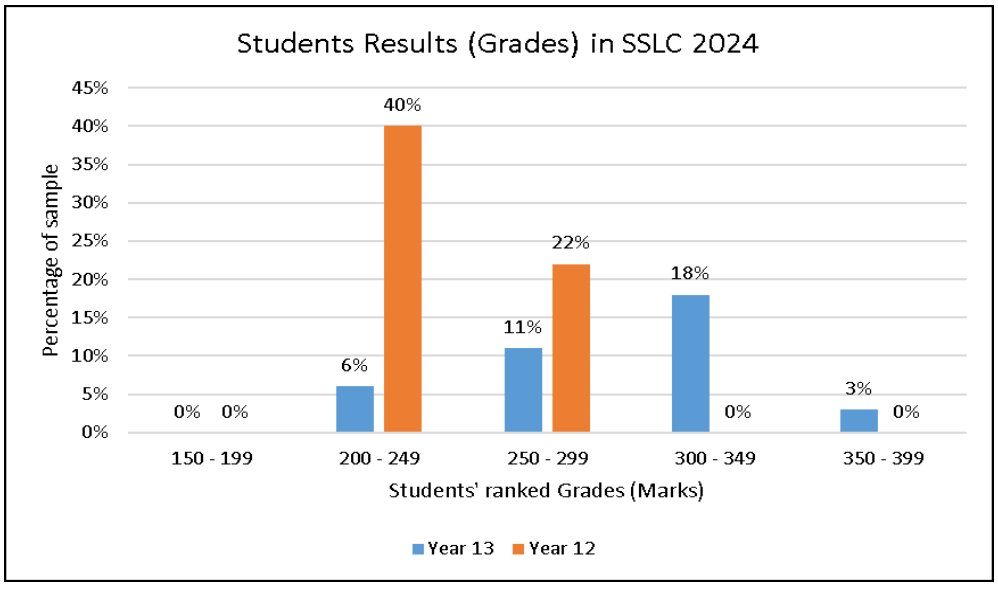

Fig 4: Students ' marks in the SSLC national examination

Graph 4 compares the score distributions of Year 12 and Year 13 students on the 2024 national examination. For Year 12, the largest proportion of students (40 percent) scored between 200–249 marks, while 22 percent achieved scores in the 250–299 range. For Year 13, performance was concentrated in higher score bands: 18 percent scored 300–349 marks, and 11 percent scored 250–299 marks. Only six percent fell into the 200–249 range. Notably, a small percentage (three percent) of Year 13 students attained the highest band shown, 350–399 marks.

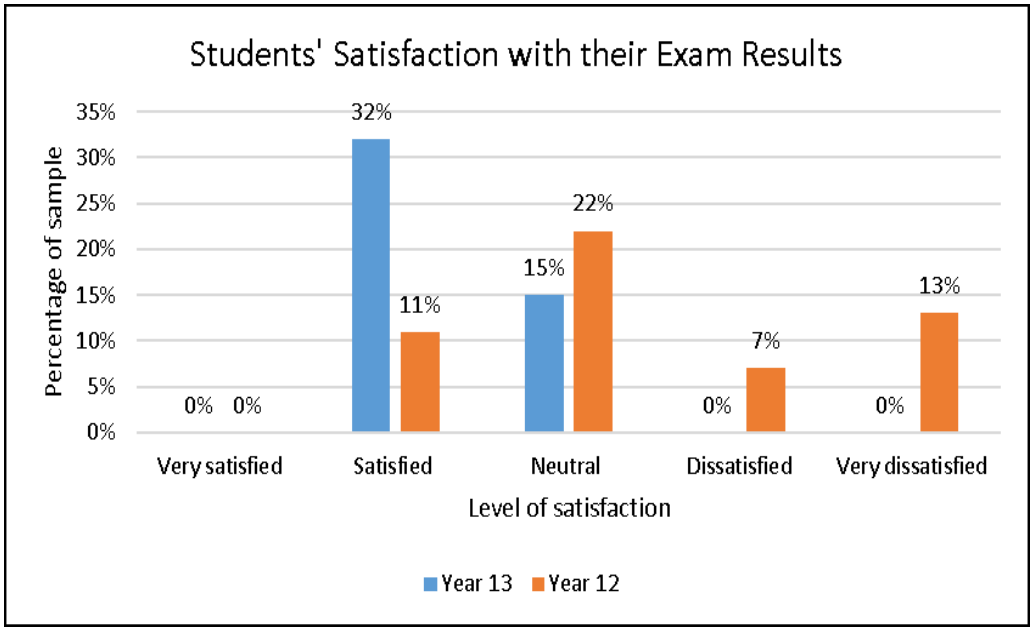

Fig 5: Year 12 and Year 13 students expressed satisfaction with their exam results

Graph 5 compares the distribution of Year 12 and Year 13 students' satisfaction with their examination results in the 2024 SSLC national examination. For Year 13, 32 percent of students reported being satisfied with their results, while 15 percent expressed a neutral level of satisfaction. Among Year 12 students, satisfaction levels were significantly lower. Only 11 percent reported being satisfied, and 22 percent fell into the neutral category. Notably, seven percent indicated dissatisfaction, and 13 percent reported being very dissatisfied with their exam results.

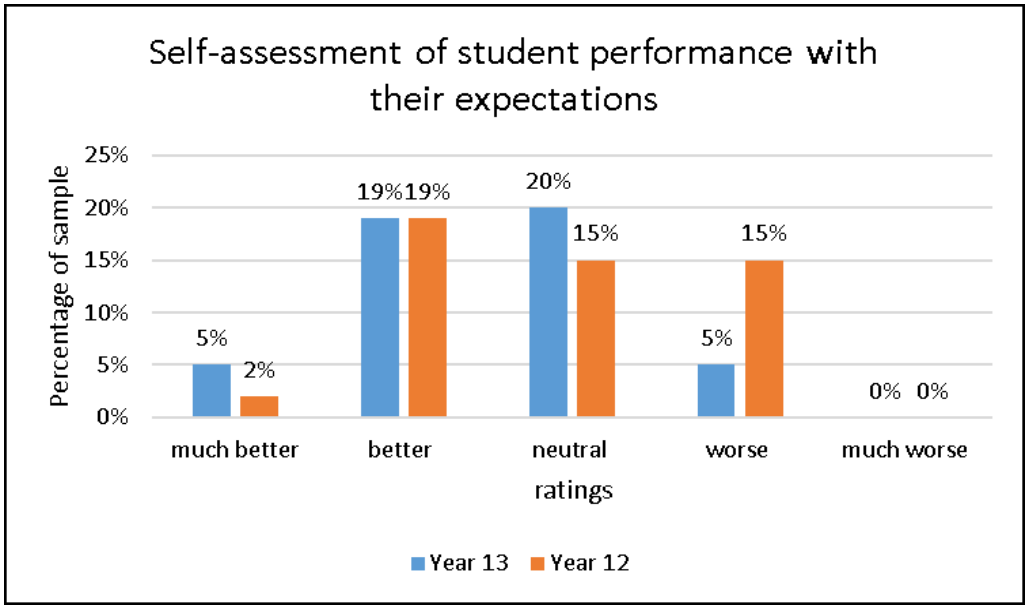

Fig 6: Students' self-assessments of their performance against their expectations

Graph 6 compares Year 12 and Year 13 students' self-assessments of their performance against their expectations on the national examination. Year 13 students reported more favorable perceptions of their performance. Specifically, 5 percent felt their results were much better than expected, 19 percent felt they were better than expected, and 20 percent felt neutral. In contrast, only five percent felt their performance was worse than expected. For Year 12 students, the distribution was less positive. Only two percent felt much better than expected, while 19 percent felt better than expected. A larger proportion, however, felt neutral (15 percent) or worse than expected (15 percent).

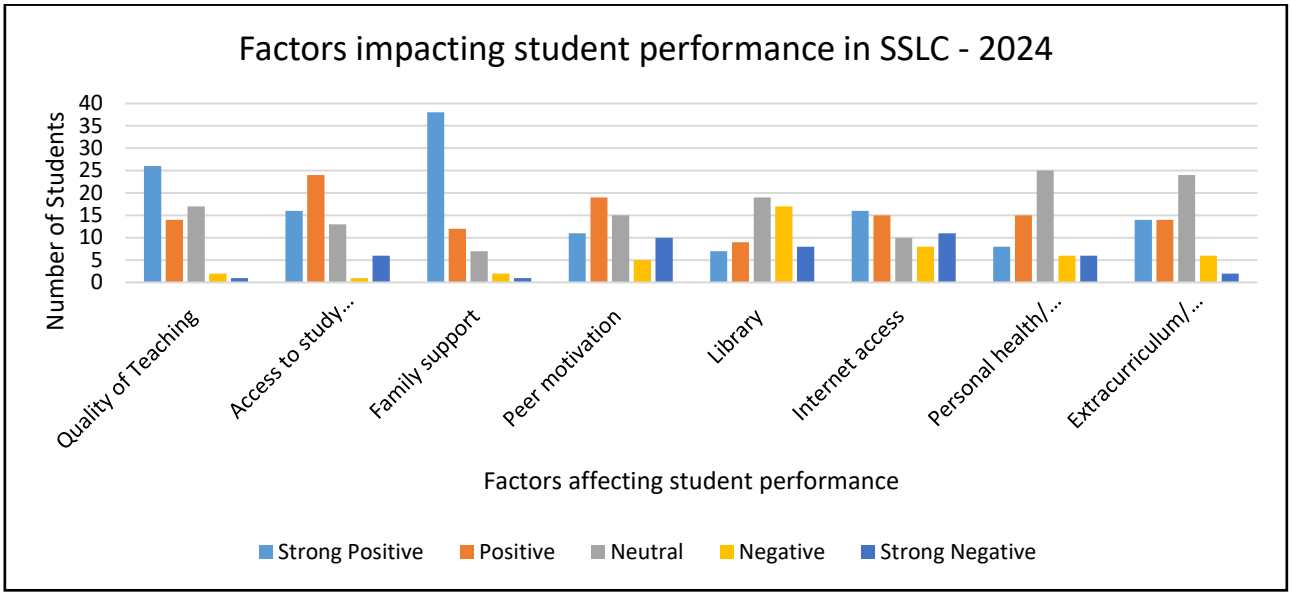

Fig 7: Learning factors influence and impact student performance in the SSLC exam

Graph 7 illustrates student perceptions of factors impacting academic performance. Family support emerges as the most influential positive factor, receiving the highest combined count of "Strong Positive" and "Positive" responses. Quality of teaching is also viewed very favorably, with minimal negative feedback. Peer motivation follows a similar trend, being generally positive despite some neutral and minor negative ratings. Among factors with a more neutral or mixed impact are access to study resources, which is viewed mostly positively or neutrally but still shows notable negative responses. Personal health and stress yield the widest spread of opinions across all five categories, indicating their highly variable effect on different students. Both library access and internet access are perceived similarly, as mostly neutral-to-positive, though internet access shows a slightly higher level of negative sentiment. The most consistently problematic factor is extracurricular commitments, which received the largest share of "Negative" and "Strong Negative" responses. This suggests that, for many students, these activities are perceived as detrimental to their academic performance.

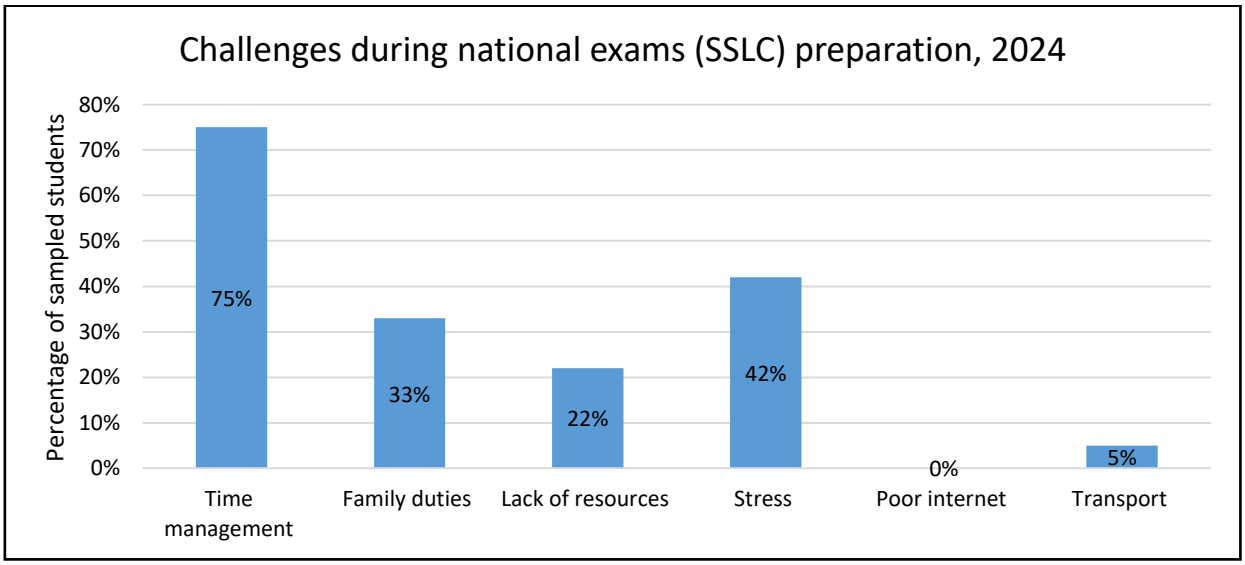

Fig 8: Challenges during exam preparation

Graph 8 highlights key challenges students faced during their SSLC exam preparation. Time management was the most prevalent issue, reported by 75 percent of students, indicating a widespread struggle with organizing research and study time effectively. Stress affected 42 percent of respondents, underscoring the significant psychological pressure associated with exam preparation. Furthermore, 33 percent of students cited family duties or commitments that interfered with their study schedule. A lack of resources was a challenge for 22 percent of students, while a small minority (five percent) identified transportation issues during the exam period. Notably, the data suggests that all surveyed students had internet access and utilized online information as part of their preparation.

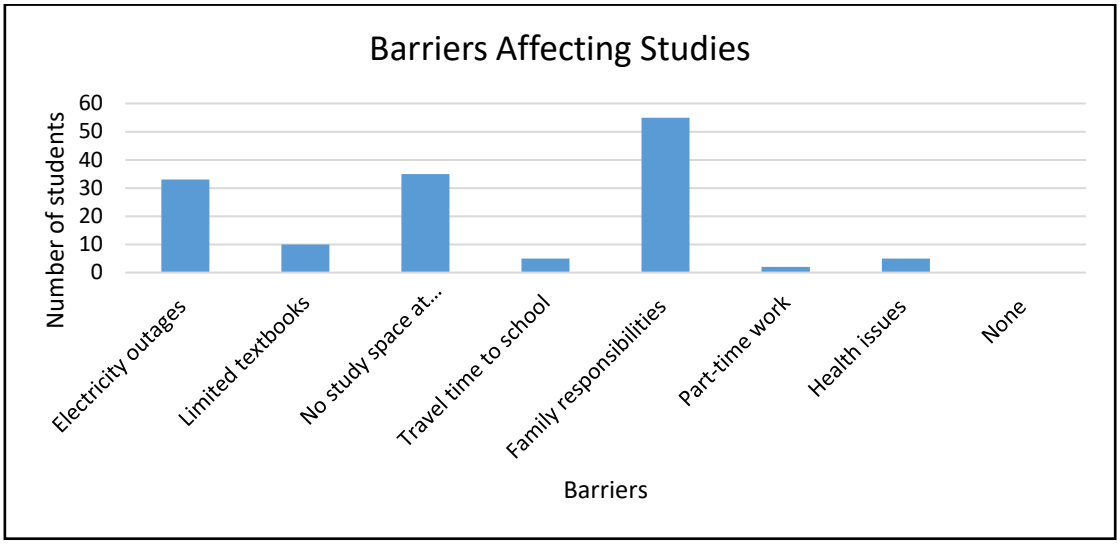

Fig 9: Barriers affecting student studies

Graph 9 illustrates the key barriers to studying as reported by students. Family responsibilities were identified as the primary obstacle, cited by 55 participants. This was followed by a lack of study space at home (35 students) and electricity outages (33 students). Other reported barriers include limited access to textbooks (10 students), travel time to school (4 students), and health issues (4 students). Finally, a small number of participants (2 students) indicated that part-time work interfered with their studies.

Qualitative open-ended question analysis

The Year 12 and 13 students' responses to this question: What one thing could your school do to better prepare students for national exams?

Based on 14 responses from Year 12 students regarding how the school could better prepare them for national exams, three key themes emerge: the need for high-quality, focused teaching; the importance of adequate resources and practice; and a call for greater teacher accountability and support.

Quality and clarity of teaching: Teachers should use simpler, clearer examples to ensure fundamental concepts are understood by all students. Instruction should strictly follow the official, unpacked learning outcomes from the Ministry of Education to avoid overwhelming us with unnecessary notes. Lessons must align precisely with the national exam outline to ensure we are studying the correct material, as inconsistencies have caused issues in the past. Our math teacher's explanations were often confusing, and lessons frequently failed to meet the learning objectives.

Our accounting teacher provided little direct instruction, often just telling us to read the notes on our own.

Resources, practice, and extra support: The school must provide essential textbooks for all subjects. We need more opportunities to practice with past exam papers and dedicated tutorial sessions. The school should organize extra classes, study camps, or other structured supplementary support. We require reliable access to online educational resources and a stable internet connection.

Teacher accountability and student motivation: The school should better monitor teacher attendance and performance, as some teachers frequently skip their classes. All teachers must consistently attend their scheduled classes, including any promised extra sessions like camps. Teachers should actively motivate students, emphasizing the importance and value of performing well in national exams.

Year 12 students emphasize a critical need for clearer, more effective teaching and reliable access to learning resources. They request instruction that uses simple examples, strictly follows official exam outlines, and avoids overloading them with unnecessary content. Direct complaints about confusing math lessons and an accounting teacher who offered little guidance highlight a desire for more supportive and comprehensible classroom experiences. Furthermore, students state that a lack of essential textbooks, past papers, and stable internet access significantly hinders their ability to study and practice effectively.

The students also call for greater institutional support and teacher accountability to improve their preparation. They report issues with teacher absenteeism and stress that all educators must consistently attend their classes, including promised extra sessions like study camps. Beyond mere attendance, they ask teachers to actively motivate them by underscoring the importance of national exams. Overall, the feedback portrays a cohort seeking more structured support, reliable resources, and accountable teaching to bridge the gap to exam success.

Based on 15 responses from Year 13 students, suggestions for better exam preparation focus on three main areas: enhancing the quality and focus of teaching, improving the provision and design of learning resources, and addressing broader systemic and motivational challenges.

Quality and focus of teaching and support: Teachers should provide targeted help in students' weak areas and motivate them by explaining the real-world purpose and usefulness of passing national exams. The school needs to hire and retain good-quality, effective teachers for every subject. Instruction should cover strictly what is required for the exam, rather than the entire syllabus indiscriminately. Teachers should explicitly teach the national exam's marking criteria - what examiners look for, the expected answer structure, and the kind of responses that score well. Teachers should make it clear they are approachable and willing to help so students feel comfortable asking questions without fear. While our teacher simplified difficult subjects like Maths and

Economics, the actual national exam questions were unexpectedly complex, suggesting a gap between classroom teaching and exam content.

Resources, time, and practice: The school must provide essential physical resources like notes, textbooks, and other useful materials. There is a strong need for revision classes, extra classes, and after-school tutorials that begin early in the year, not just as exams approach. Resources should be accessible to all; providing more handy, physical notes is crucial, as not all students have reliable internet access for online materials.

Systemic, cultural, and motivational factors: The school and community should encourage students to prioritize their studies over other commitments, such as part-time work and fundraising, allowing more time for focused revision. Greater student discipline is needed, as some peers treat studies too lightly despite teachers' advice. The school's leadership should focus more on direct academic support for students rather than peripheral projects, such as infrastructure rebuilding. There is a need for government intervention to provide the school with adequate educational resources.

Year 13 students identify a need for more strategic, exam-focused teaching to improve their preparation. They request instruction that directly targets individual weaknesses and strictly aligns with the national exam's content and marking criteria. Students emphasize the importance of motivated, high-quality teachers who are approachable and who explain the real-world value of success. Critically, they note a concerning gap between simplified classroom teaching and the complexity of actual exam questions.

Beyond the classroom, students call for better resources and a supportive institutional environment. They stress the necessity of accessible physical materials like textbooks and notes, as well as structured extra classes that begin early in the year. Besides, they highlight systemic issues, asking the school leadership to prioritize academic support over other projects, and for the community to help students prioritize study time over work or fundraising commitments.

Summary

An analysis of feedback from Year 12 and Year 13 students reveals a strong, consistent call for the school to transform its approach to national exam preparation. While both year groups share core concerns, their perspectives evolve from immediate classroom issues to broader systemic challenges. The student feedback presents a clear, two-pronged mandate for the school. Firstly, immediate, actionable improvements are needed within the classroom: refining teaching focus, ensuring resource availability, and providing early, consistent extra support. Secondly, the responses, particularly from Year 13, point to deeper systemic challenges - concerning priorities, culture, and external support - that must be addressed to create an environment where effective exam preparation is possible for all students.

In summary, student feedback presents a unified and urgent call for the school to implement more strategic, exam-focused teaching and to guarantee reliable access to essential resources and early support. While Year 12 students emphasize immediate classroom improvements like teacher accountability, Year 13 students extend the critique to systemic barriers such as competing commitments and institutional priorities. This collective insight underscores that effective exam preparation demands both refined instructional practices and a broader school environment that consistently prioritizes and enables academic success.

University lecturers' views about Year 12 and 13 students' performance

Economic Lecturer 1

Lecturer 1 identifies a significant preparedness gap between Year 12 and Year 13 students, attributing it primarily to a structural change in the national curriculum. Year 12 students, having compressed the accounting syllabus into a single year due to the transition from a five-year to a four-year secondary system, often lack readiness for university foundation work. They possess basic conceptual understanding but struggle with application. In contrast, Year 13 students benefited from two full years on the curriculum, resulting in more robust foundational knowledge and greater confidence.

The lecturer further explains that the differences extend beyond curriculum exposure to include maturity and communication skills. Year 13 students are noted to be generally more focused and goal-oriented. Their extended secondary experience also fostered stronger writing skills and a more integrated, critical use of technology. Year 12 students, however, often exhibit weaknesses in academic and expressive writing, and their over-reliance on mobile technology may impede deeper critical thinking.

Despite these challenges, both groups possess clear strengths. Year 12 students are characterized as receptive, fast learners who thrive with consistent teacher guidance and interactive resources. Year 13 students demonstrate advanced comprehension and independent learning habits. The lecturer concludes that for both cohorts, ultimate success is less about innate capability and more about application: Year 12 students require significant teacher investment to bridge their preparation gap, while Year 13 students must channel their abilities through personal motivation and willpower.

Economic Lecturer 2

Lecture 2 said the Year 12 and 13 students enrolled into university show a moderate, basic grasp of Economics, but have noticeable gaps requiring targeted support. Year 13 students are somewhat better prepared, often due to greater exposure, and urban schools generally show higher levels of competence than rural ones due to resource disparities. Continued academic support is needed to strengthen their foundational knowledge for tertiary study.

Lecturer 2 perceived differences in learning capability between Year 12 and Year 13 economics students stem from contextual and developmental factors rather than inherent ability. These factors include greater cognitive and academic maturity, cumulative prior knowledge, and more refined study skills in Year 13, as well as higher-stakes assessments, increased motivation due to subject selection, and continued language and literacy development. She added that teaching approaches often shift to expect more independence, and students themselves typically exhibit greater confidence and academic focus as they near tertiary education.

Lecturer 2 pointed out that Samoa's Year 12 Economics students generally possess solid oral and cultural communication skills within their own context, such as effective group collaboration and presentations. However, they face significant challenges with formal academic writing in English, a key skill for success at the university preparatory level, partly because English is formally learned at school

while Samoan is their first language.

She elaborated, saying specific weaknesses include difficulties with English grammar, vocabulary, and the structured argumentation required for economic analysis, compounded by limited practice in critical writing and cultural classroom dynamics that may discourage open debate. Lecture 2 added that many students have substantial family responsibilities that reduce time for homework and independent writing practice.

Lecturer 2 said that for a successful transition to tertiary study, these students require targeted support. This includes explicit instruction in academic writing conventions, enhanced English language development focused on economic vocabulary, and increased opportunities to practice research-based writing and critical analysis to bridge the gap to university expectations.

She explained that the broader educational context in Samoa reveals systemic challenges with English literacy and writing skills, which is the primary language of senior secondary and tertiary instruction. National assessments consistently highlight these difficulties, prompting official initiatives like teacher training programs to strengthen English literacy. Within this environment, Year 13 Economics students often possess a reasonable conceptual grasp of the subject and strengths in oral communication, but their academic writing in English remains a significant barrier to success at the tertiary preparatory level.

Lecturer 2 said bilingual capacity aids comprehension, and by Year 13, they can often describe economic concepts in writing, especially with prior practice in exam-style questions. Culturally developed oral communication skills also support their ability to articulate ideas verbally, which benefits presentations and group work common in foundational studies.

However, she argued that critical weaknesses persist, directly impacting tertiary readiness. A primary challenge is formal academic writing in English, including difficulties with argumentation, technical vocabulary, essay structure, and grammar. Cultural norms and external responsibilities further reduce opportunities for writing practice and feedback.

Lecturer 2 said the transition to the independent, writing-intensive demands of the Foundation year or tertiary study is difficult. Students may underperform not from a lack of understanding but due to poor organization, language use, and analytical reasoning in their written work. Targeted support in academic writing, vocabulary, and structured practice is therefore essential to bridge this gap and improve their chances of academic success.

Discussion

This research provides a comprehensive, multi-perspective analysis of the academic preparation, performance, and challenges faced by Year 12 and Year 13 students in Samoa's Foundation Accounting and Economics programme. By integrating quantitative data on resources, performance, and perceptions with qualitative student feedback and lecturer insights, a coherent narrative emerges. It reveals a cohort navigating a critical educational transition, where disparities in preparedness between year levels are shaped by systemic curriculum changes, pedagogical practices, and significant socio-environmental constraints.

Divergent pathways of Year 12 and Year 13 students

A central finding is the marked disparity in academic outcomes and self-perception between Year 12 and Year 13 students. Quantitative data clearly shows Year 13 students outperforming their Year 12 counterparts, with a greater proportion achieving higher score bands (Graph 4) and ratings of "well" or "excellent" (Graph 3). Consequently, Year 13 students report higher satisfaction (Graph 5) and more positive self-assessments against expectations (Graph 6). The lecturers' insights provide a crucial explanatory framework for this divergence. As articulated by Lecturer 1, the structural shift from a five-year to a four-year secondary system has compressed the accounting syllabus for Year 12 into a single year, creating a "significant preparedness gap." In contrast, Year 13 students benefited from the previous two-year curriculum, allowing for deeper knowledge consolidation. This systemic change directly impacts foundational readiness for tertiary study.

Furthermore, the lecturers highlight developmental and skill-based differences. Year 13 students are perceived as more academically mature, with stronger independent learning habits, goal orientation, and crucially, more developed academic writing skills. Lecturer 2 expands on this, identifying persistent challenges with formal academic writing in English—the language of tertiary instruction—as a major barrier. While both cohorts possess solid oral communication skills and conceptual understanding, Year 12 students are particularly vulnerable due to less curricular exposure and weaker written expression. This aligns with the students' own feedback, where Year 13s noted a gap between simplified classroom teaching and complex exam questions, suggesting a need for more sophisticated analytical and written response training.

Resources, barriers, and institutional gaps

Students predominantly relied on traditional study resources: school notes, past papers, textbooks, and extra classes (Graph 2). The minimal use of online information (2 students) and private tutors (10 students) likely reflects socio-economic constraints and access issues, not preference. This is corroborated by the identified challenges: while all had internet access (Graph 8), issues like electricity outages (Graph 9) and a lack of physical resources were prominent barriers.

The most significant hurdles were not purely academic but logistical and environmental. Time management was the paramount challenge (75%), followed by stress (42%), and critically, family responsibilities (33% in Graph 8, 55 students in Graph 9). This triangulates powerfully with Graph 7, where "extracurricular commitments" (encompassing family duties) were perceived as the most consistently negative factor impacting performance. The qualitative data vividly explain this: students explicitly request that the school and community help them prioritize studies "over other commitments, such as part-time work and fundraising." This highlights a fundamental conflict between academic demands and socio-cultural/familial obligations, creating a time poverty that undermines effective preparation.

Student feedback forms a direct critique of the institutional support system. Both year groups converge on demands for: 1) Higher-quality, exam-focused teaching (clearer examples,

alignment with marking criteria, teacher accountability for absenteeism), 2) Reliable access to essential resources (textbooks, past papers, physical notes), and 3) Structured, early, and consistent extra support (tutorials, revision classes starting early in the year). The evolution in critique is notable: Year 12 students focus on immediate classroom dynamics (e.g., confusing teachers), while Year 13 students, with broader experience, point to systemic and cultural factors - school leadership priorities, community attitudes, and the need for government resource intervention. This suggests that as students' progress, they perceive their academic challenges as less about individual teacher performance and more about embedded institutional and environmental structures.

Bridging the gaps for tertiary readiness

The findings present a multi-layered challenge for educational stakeholders. At the core is a preparedness gap exacerbated by curriculum reform, manifesting in weaker foundational knowledge and academic writing skills, particularly in Year 12. Surrounding this are pedagogical gaps, where teaching methods may not fully bridge the complexity between classroom instruction and national exam or tertiary expectations. These are compounded by a resource and environmental gap, where a lack of reliable study materials, time, and a supportive study environment (due to family duties, space, and power issues) constrains student agency.

Finally, a systemic and cultural gap is evident, where school priorities, community expectations, and familial responsibilities are not fully aligned to support intensive academic preparation. The lecturers' call for "targeted support" in academic writing and foundational concepts directly responds to the preparedness and pedagogical gaps identified in both the performance data and student feedback.

Summary

In summary, the discussion reveals that student performance and satisfaction are not merely functions of individual effort but are deeply mediated by a complex interplay of systemic, pedagogical, and socio-environmental factors. The superior performance of Year 13 students can be largely attributed to greater curriculum exposure and maturity, yet both cohorts struggle under similar external constraints and express aligned demands for better teaching and resources.

To enhance national exam performance and tertiary readiness, interventions must be multi-pronged: curricular and pedagogical reforms to address the foundational gap and improve exam-focused teaching; institutional actions to ensure resource availability, teacher accountability, and early academic support; and broader community engagement to create a culture that prioritizes and protects student study time. Addressing only one dimension will be insufficient; a holistic approach that synchronizes policy, pedagogy, and community support is essential for improving student outcomes in Samoa's transitioning educational landscape.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the academic journey of students in the National University of Samoa's Foundation programme is shaped by a complex convergence of systemic, instructional, and socio-environmental forces. The research unequivocally demonstrates a significant performance and preparedness divide between Year 12 and Year 13 students, with the latter cohort achieving higher examination scores, greater satisfaction, and more positive self-assessments. However, this disparity is not a simple reflection of ability. As lecturer insights clarify, it is fundamentally rooted in a structural curriculum gap—the compression of syllabus due to the transition from a five-to a four-year secondary system—which leaves Year 12 students with a weaker foundation in core concepts and critical academic writing skills essential for tertiary success.

Beyond this core gap, both year groups navigate a challenging ecosystem of preparation. While they utilize traditional study resources, their efforts are profoundly constrained by a resource and environmental gap, where a lack of reliable materials, electricity outages, and inadequate study space at home create practical barriers. Most critically, a socio-cultural gap emerges, wherein overwhelming family responsibilities and community commitments create a state of "time poverty," identified as the single greatest obstacle to effective study. This external pressure exacerbates widespread struggles with time management and stress, detracting from academic focus.

Student feedback and lecturer evaluations point collectively to a pedagogical and institutional gap. Students from both levels call for more strategic, exam-focused teaching, better teacher accountability, and early, consistent academic support. Their critique evolves from classroom-level issues in Year 12 to systemic concerns about school priorities and community support in Year 13, indicating a growing awareness of the broader structures impacting their success. This aligns with lecturers' identification of academic writing in English as a critical weakness, highlighting a misalignment between secondary preparation and tertiary expectations.

Therefore, efforts to improve national examination performance and tertiary readiness cannot rely on student diligence alone. They require a coordinated, multi-tiered response. At the policy level, a review of the compressed Year 12 curriculum and enhanced support for academic literacy is imperative. At the institutional level, schools must ensure the provision of essential resources, implement robust teacher development and accountability mechanisms, and institute structured revision programs that begin early in the academic year. At the community level, dialogue is needed to align expectations and foster an environment where academic pursuits are prioritized and protected.

In essence, this research underscores that educational outcomes are the product of an entire ecosystem. Enhancing student achievement

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