

Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa

*Re-visiting and re-envisioning Bhutan's education system in the 21st century:
Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa on its education pledges*

Education is free in Bhutan which invests a large amount of money in education. According to a report by the World Bank (2019), Bhutan's spending on education constituted 5.1 percent of Gross Domestic Product in 2013 and increased to 6.7 percent in 2016. This spending is higher than the neighbouring countries¹ and indicates the singular priority that the Royal Government places on education. This stems from His Majesty the King's prioritising education:

“I have a number of priorities. Number one on my list is education. Education is empowering. It is a social equaliser and it facilitates self-discovery which leads to realising one's full potential. I believe in education” (4 October 2014).

In light of this, it is important that any reform in the education sector should prioritise quality and not undermine it for vested, political interests. At the outset, we should be extremely proud of the education system that our country has. However, in keeping with time, especially in terms of quality, relevance and usefulness to meet the current and future needs of the country and the world at large, it is crucial that positive and impactful reforms be introduced in the education sector. Thus, DNT's stand on education, drawing from its 2013 manifesto, is that there needs to be a paradigm shift from “education for all” to “education with quality that is responsive to the Bhutanese and global employment opportunities” (2018 DNT Manifesto).

¹<http://www.kuenselonline.com/lack-of-quality-jobs-despite-heavy-investment-in-education-says-world-bank/>

Towards this, Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa (DNT) made the following education commitments in the run-up to the third parliamentary elections in 2018:

- Remove cut-off points for Class X students to enable them to continue studying until Class XII;
- Consider doing away with Saturday classes;
- Do away with examinations until Class VI;
- Make teaching a profession to vie for, by offering the best and most prestigious scholarships; and
- Better pay and allowances, more administrative and support staff to ease teacher workload.

Review central schools to make it better and reopen strategic community and primary schools that are useful and beneficial in certain communities. The first three pledges and especially the removal of cut-off point attracted criticisms from the other political parties as being populist, unsustainable, unconstitutional and more importantly questioned their impact on the quality of education. The subsequent discussions, hereafter, will dwell mostly on the cut-off removal given that this pledge has come under massive criticism.

At the outset, it is not the intention of DNT or any other political parties, as they vie to form the government, to lower the quality of education in any way. Rather, it stands critical of what constitutes quality of education in the way we are talking today. Is quality of education 100 percent pass percentage that every school is striving to achieve? In the current scenario, it is singularly the academic achievement that quality of education is all about. Hence, it is critical to reflect on what is quality of education in the first place. Thus, the pledges were firmly couched in the wisdom of His Majesty the King and the holism it will deliver to the students, besides extensive interactions and consultations undertaken with the people of diverse professions including those at the grassroots level. His Majesty the King envisions the quality of education:

“That it is not enough to provide free education, we must provide education of such quality that it will guarantee a distinguished place for our youth anywhere in the world,” (3rd Royal University of Bhutan Convocation).

In light of His Majesty's vision of education, it is important that we reflect whether our education system today is delivering quality education to the students especially in the context of "mismatch of skills" that are widely talked about in the job market. Hence, the pledges related to education were guided by the vision of His Majesty and in full cognizance of the diverse requirements of the job market.

The Justification of the Pledges/Commitments

With the topic, "Investing in our Children", for the 6th Friday Meet held on 8 February 2019, the government responded to the foggy questions that surrounded the implementation of the education pledges. In re-visiting and re-envisioning our country's education system, the following priorities will guide the course of the shift:

- Shift from summative to formative education;
- Enhance teacher quality with improved facilities and services.

Provide Conducive Environment for Education

The cut off point was set with a singular intent to reduce pressure on the limited infrastructure capacity of the government schools and is not the only measure for the quality of education. Despite the noble intent underlying it, the Class X passed students were forcefully made to look for jobs at a young age without equipping them with the skills required of a job market.

On the constitutionality of the cut-off removal, the government clarified that the initiative does not contradict the Constitution in whatever way it is interpreted. The issue of unconstitutionality, as raised by the Opposition and others, arise basically from their disconnect in the reading of the sections related to Article 9. The picture becomes clear if Article 9, section 16, is read along with section 15 which states:

"The State endeavours to provide education for the purpose of improving and increasing knowledge, values and skills of the entire population with education being directed towards the full development of the human personality".

In addition, during the public consultation of the draft Constitution in Bumthang in 2006, His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo commanded:

“When the country becomes prosperous the government may provide free education not only up to 12th standard but may be able to provide up to 13th, 14th and 15th standard”.

Further, with our country to graduate to a middle income country in 2023, it is even more crucial to make this move.

The question of sustainability that the opposition and other political parties raised is in itself an answer to the present system that is unsustainable. If our children are not provided with an opportunity to continue higher education, they will go on to become a burden to the country and this will cost the country even more if this investment is not made now. A deeper dive into the youth unemployment rate of 12.5 percent shows that a large proportion of unemployed youth are Class X and XII passed students. Hence, the Class X cut off removal by the government is an attempt to seal one source of youth unemployment by creating a platform for Class X passed students to continue to Class XI and onward to XII.

The concerns were also raised on transferring unemployment from Class X to XII, which is a valid argument. However, opportunities for gainful employment opportunities begin only after Class XII in the form of diploma and degree courses and other training opportunities. Thus, the initiative confides that it is not the transfer of unemployment to Class XII; rather, given many gainful employment opportunities created as a result of several options, it is highly likely that the number of unproductive children will reduce.

Hence, despite the criticisms that surround the pledges/commitments, DNT firmly believes in the long-term benefits the pledges will deliver with the purpose and quality of education fully in respect of the vision of His Majesty coupled with extensive consultations with the public. DNT plays the role of a facilitator in realising the vision of His Majesty the King and implementing the wishes of the people.