

Implication of Bhutanese Studying Outside

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A Government Vision for Tertiary Education

“Twenty years from now, we will be equipped with the full range of institutions required for the formation of the knowledge and skills required to sustain the nation’s further development. At the apex of our institutions of learning will be a well-equipped university that will not only meet the intellectual and learning needs of Bhutanese but will also attract students from other countries, both within the region and beyond.”¹

This was a vision conceived for tertiary education that was charted in 1999, in the Vision 2020 document which proposed to establish, “at the earliest feasible opportunity, a National University that is not only able to meet national needs but also those of individuals from neighbouring countries and even further afield. The university should link Bhutan to the international world of learning and its establishment should be guided by the need to establish recognised “centres of excellence”.²

Before the Royal University of Bhutan (RUB) was founded, Bhutan did not have a university. In 1983, Sherubtse Junior College was upgraded and became an undergraduate degree college affiliated to Delhi University. There were other tertiary educational institutes³ but they were governed by specific ministries and the degrees were awarded by the institutions themselves.⁴ Hence, there was a need to set up a university to lead and regulate a sound tertiary education system.

Thus, in 2003, the Royal University of Bhutan was established based on a federated college model. As a result, all the tertiary educational institutions which, were previously governed by specific ministries and agencies, were

¹Planning Commission, RGOB (1999). Bhutan 2020: A Vision for Peace, Prosperity and Happiness (Part II), pp.71

²Ibid, pp.20

³Some of the other Tertiary Education Institutes that existed before the establishment of the first university in Bhutan are National Institute of Education in Samtse and Paro, Royal Institute of Health Sciences, Natural Resources Training Institute at Lobesa, Royal Bhutan Polytechnic in Dewathang and Royal Bhutan Institute of Technology in Rinchening and Royal Institute of Management.

⁴DAHE, MoE. The State of Tertiary Education in Bhutan: 2017, pp.1-2

placed under the auspices of the university. Today, tertiary education comprises RUB, with its 10 constituent colleges and two affiliated colleges, the Khesar Gyalpo University of Medical Sciences of Bhutan (KGUMSB) which was established in 2015 with three distinct faculties constituting three individual colleges and one affiliated college, the Ministry of Labour's Royal Institute of Management, and the Jigme Singye Wangchuck School of Law.⁵

Need and Sustainability of Expanding Tertiary Institutions

There is a need to address the concern that large numbers of Bhutanese are pursuing higher education in the neighbouring countries. A report, entitled 'Analysis of students pursuing undergraduate programmes 2015', by the Department of Adult and Higher Education (DAHE), stated that there are were 2,953 Bhutanese students studying in colleges in India. This number was for registered students and there were are many more who were not registered. Of the 2,953 students, nearly 2,000 of them were privately funded. Two years later, the number of students pursuing higher studies outside of Bhutan, rose to 4,628, reported the 'State of Tertiary Education in Bhutan 2017'. Of that number, 3,544 were studying in India.⁶ The report also stated that "it is believed that the number of tertiary students studying abroad on their own would be more than what was been captured by DAHE."⁷

The Royal University of Bhutan also shared similar observations in its Strategic Plan (2013-2020) ... "currently, due to lack of comparable opportunities within the country that high-school students can opt for, qualify for, and can afford, it is seen that as many students study in foreign institutions as those enrolled in tertiary education institutions within the country."⁸

⁵Ibid, pp.1-2

⁶DAHE, MoE. The State of Tertiary Education in Bhutan: 2017, pp.17

⁷Ibid

⁸RUB (2015). The Royal University of Bhutan Strategic Plan (2013-2020), pp.5

These documents indicate that there is a demand for more places at tertiary institutions and the need to expand these institutions. According to a course and place preference survey conducted among students by Norbuling Rigter College, the majority of the respondents (78.3 percent) preferred to study in Bhutan while 21.7 percent opted to study in India. Although studying in Bhutan was preferred, students did say that “Pursuing further studies abroad was the only option for many Bhutanese who could not be accommodated in the country’s limited colleges and tertiary institutions.”⁹

In its experience, when Norbuling Rigter College opened for enrolment, 500 students registered for a planned intake of just 350, showing that Bhutanese wished to study in the country. In actuality, only 91 students met the eligibility criteria approved by the Royal University of Bhutan.¹⁰

The main reasons cited for choosing to study in Bhutan were safety, proximity to family, and the ability to stay abreast of developments in Bhutan to help them prepare for RCSC.¹¹ On the other hand, the reasons for choosing to study in India were exposure, lower fees, better facilities, and more course and college options.¹²

Besides the need to invest in the expansion of tertiary educational institutions and the willingness of the students to study in Bhutan, the feasibility and sustainability of such an investment should also be considered. At present, each college has the capacity to admit approximately 900 to 1,500 students. As can be seen in the following table illustrating the intake capacity and the number of students wanting to enrol between 2014 to 2018, there was an annual shortfall of places. As a case in point, even with the establishment of an additional private college¹³ in July 2017, there was a gap between demand and supply of 3,790 in 2018. Although there is no data on what the students who do not qualify for government scholarships do, it is assumed that many of them would pursue higher studies in the neighbouring countries, thus indicating the need to establish more institutions for tertiary education to accommodate them.

⁹<http://www.kuenselonline.com/mishandling-the-smu-issue/>

¹⁰Information from admission record of Norbuling Rigter College, Paro.

¹¹NRC (2017). Course and Place preference survey: An insight into options of Bhutanese students to pursue higher studies, pp.11. The study captured 1032 class XII students of all the three streams from 18 schools spread across Bhutan.

¹²Ibid, pp.17

¹³Norbuling Rigter College was established in July 2017.

Year	Students who passed class XII	RUB constituent colleges	KGUMS	Others TEIs	Total of TEIs	Demand supply gap
2014	9163	3471	No data (Rough estimate of 900 annually) 4623 4848		4371	4792
2015	8855	3723			4232	
2016	8830	3948			3982	
2017	9280	4224	187	5124	4156	4189
2018	9114	4424	No data ((Rough estimate of 900 annually)		5324	3790

Table 1: Intake capacity of Tertiary Education Institutions of Bhutan in year one.¹⁴

The National Statistical Bureau's¹⁵ projection of population growth shows that, annually, there will be more than 45,000 Bhutanese in the 19 to 22 year age bracket, many of whom might wish to pursue higher education. Therefore, it may be concluded that investments in the expansion of tertiary education is sustainable.

Year	Rural	Urban	Total
2022	26,357	27,589	53,946
2027	24,234	29,663	53,897
2032	19,580	28,408	47,988
2037	16,593	28,407	45,000
2042	15,622	31,656	47,278
2047	13,436	32,333	45,769

Table 2: Projection of population who would be in the age group of pursuing studies (19 to 22 years).¹⁶

Benefits of Expanding Tertiary Institutions

As discussed in the preceding section, there were 4,628 students pursuing higher studies outside Bhutan in 2017, of which 3,544 were studying in India.¹⁷ The report also stated that the number enrolled in institutions outside of Bhutan should be higher but that data was not available to the

¹⁴BCSEA, Pupil Performance Report (2015, 2016, 2017 and 2018); RUB (2015). The Royal University of

¹⁵NSB (2019). Population Projections Bhutan 2017-2047, pp.69

¹⁶Bhutan Strategic Plan (2013-2020); DAHE, MoE. The State of Tertiary Education in Bhutan: 2017; and <https://www.pressreader.com/>

¹⁷Ibid

Department of Adult and Higher Education.¹⁸ Even if we just consider the case of students studying in India which is a total of 3,544 students it would mean that, annually, about 1,200 Bhutanese are enrolled in the Universities in India because Bhutan has not been able to meet the demand. To address the need to provide more places in tertiary institutions within Bhutan, the ‘Bhutan Education Blueprint 2014-2024: Rethinking Education’ recommended that “private sector participation in diverse fields at the tertiary level”¹⁹ be promoted. If Bhutan fails to address the shortfall and access to quality tertiary education urgently, there might be negative consequences for the economy and the social and cultural fabric of the country.

Economic Benefits

In 2016, in the State of the Nation Report, Prime Minister Dasho Tshering Tobgay²⁰ reported that about Nu 700 Million was spent by Bhutanese on education. He reiterated the need to establish more tertiary educational institutions.

Expanding the tertiary education sector will have positive, multiplier effects on the nation’s economy. Firstly, it would generate employment for hundreds of Bhutanese who work as faculty members, as well as administrative and support staff.

Secondly, the establishment of institutions would stimulate the economy of the community and its environs: staff would rent houses near the college campus, farmers would have a ready market for their vegetables and livestock products, and shops and restaurants would emerge to cater to the staff and students.

Socio-cultural Benefits

Although it is important for Bhutanese students to get exposure by studying outside Bhutan, it is necessary to assess if all of that exposure is positive. There are stories of students wasting their time, visiting socially unhealthy environs and having substance abuse issues. This has affected many who study in sub-standard colleges with private funding. Thus, to guard against

¹⁸DAHE, MoE. The State of Tertiary Education in Bhutan: 2017, pp.17

¹⁹Ministry of Education, Bhutan Education Blueprint 2014-2024: Rethinking Education

²⁰<http://www.bbs.bt/news/?p=60317>

these negative influences, it is crucial to create the space and opportunities for our youths to study in Bhutan and keep them connected to Bhutanese values and practices and grows into responsible citizens. In his keynote address at the Inauguration of Norbuling Rigter College, the then Prime Minister of Bhutan (2013 to 2018), Dasho Tshering Tobgay, underscored the importance of values, stating that the “College should infuse Bhutanese values, culture, and history so that children stay rooted. This cannot be found even in top notch universities. However, it is important to blend this with international ideas.”²¹

Good Quality RUB Curriculum for Students

In its strategic plan document, the Royal University of Bhutan stated:

“Some of those who enrol in universities abroad end up in institutions of questionable repute, thus wasting resources and their precious time. This situation calls for the need to invest more in the expansion of tertiary education within the country to address the rapidly rising demand more effectively.”²²

This statement was echoed by the Education Sector Review Commission in 2008:

“... with an increasing number of Bhutanese students pursuing higher education outside the country, a matter of particular concern arises from the importance of protecting students from low-quality or disreputable providers of higher education outside the country.”²³

As an example of sub-par degrees, that from Sikkim Manipal University comes to mind when in 2017, it was discovered that the degree offered by this institute was gained through distance learning.²⁴ The Royal Civil Service Commission (RCSC) stopped recognising the degree. As a result, it dashed the hopes of many graduates who had aimed to work in the civil service. Similarly, when the Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB) made

²¹RUB (2015). The Royal University of Bhutan Strategic Plan (2013-2020), pp.5

²²Education Sector Review Commission (2008). Education without compromise, pp.43

²³<http://www.kuenselonline.com/mishandling-the-smu-issue/>

²⁴This argument is based on the fact that most of the Bhutanese studying in the neighboring countries are admitted in colleges of questionable repute.

the same decision, many youths who had aspired to become politicians, could not do so. To overcome the problem of Bhutanese students having to study in colleges of questionable repute outside of the country, and as a result having graduates who are not employable, the number of tertiary institutions needs to be increased.

While the curriculum offered by our tertiary institutions may not, as yet, be of the standard of internationally acclaimed institutions, graduates of tertiary institutions in Bhutan, who go on to pursue masters and doctoral studies in universities in advanced countries, have performed very well. This may be a positive indicator that tertiary education in Bhutan is relevant and is of comparable standard.²⁵

The Trail Ahead: Where Should Tertiary Institutions in Bhutan Head?

There is, without a doubt, a need for change. Tertiary institutions in Bhutan should be able to accommodate the number of students who aspire to study in the country and prepare them for the global job market. But how responsive will the institutions be to the demands of the Bhutanese students? How should the learning ecosystem change to support and cater to the needs of the job market? What should be the way forward for the tertiary institutions? Some of these pertinent issues are discussed below.

Trail One: At the heart of any temple of learning is its curriculum. Although more tertiary institutions are needed, their approval should come with the conditions that require the institutes to offer innovative, job-relevant programmes instead of adopting existing programmes from other institutions. Such initiatives will create opportunities for students to benefit from current and relevant courses in Bhutan.

Trail Two: Currently, similar programmes are offered in several colleges, as in the case of the Business studies programme. Gedu College of Business Studies, Royal Thimphu College, and Norbuling Rigter College together, churn out more than 500 business graduates annually. Does Bhutan have a large enough market to absorb all these graduates?

²⁵This argument is based on the fact that most of the Bhutanese studying in the neighbouring countries are admitted in colleges of questionable repute.

Are they capable enough to enter the international job market or become entrepreneurs? Thus, to avoid flooding the job market with large numbers of graduates from one programme, limiting the number of students for each programme may encourage the tertiary institutions to innovate and invest in more current and targeted programmes.

Trail Three: Before a tertiary institution is approved, a study of the holding capacity for each campus should be conducted to ensure quality and the relevance of the programmes offered. Some urgent questions that may be considered are: Does the existing infrastructure and facilities promote learning? Is there space and scope for expansion of the existing tertiary institutions? Based on the findings, a projection of student intake capacity for each institute could be made and adhered to. This will ensure that each tertiary institution will focus on offering quality education to an optimum number of students.

Trail Four: The National Education Policy of Bhutan states that the TEIs in Bhutan should offer courses that are relevant to the current, as well as future national, social, economic, and spiritual needs.²⁶ To fulfil this policy, the tertiary institutions must diversify their programmes. In addition, the programmes must be aligned with technical and vocational education so that they cater to the job market. Therefore, the target of the tertiary institutions should be to train more skilled professionals rather than general graduates who might face challenges in finding employment.

Trail Five: As a preferred destination for higher education, Bhutan ranks high with its advantages of having a pristine environment, a rich culture, the principles of Gross National Happiness, and quite importantly, it is safe. These factors might well attract students from other countries. Therefore, tertiary institutions should establish their reputations by committing to stringent, high quality academic and research standards. The institutions should also invest in high calibre human capital, up-to-date facilities, and innovative and relevant programmes. Such investments and commitment will propel the tertiary institutions in Bhutan to leapfrog even the globally acclaimed educational institutions, thereby making Bhutan a preferred education destination.

²⁶MoE. National Educational Policy (Draft), pp.12

Reference

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