

# **The Bhutan Baccalaureate: A Bhutanese Initiative**

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His Majesty The King's National Day address in 2020 sparked - in fact, forced - discussions among planners and implementers, teachers and parents, academics and students in Bhutan, as well as educators both within and outside the country. Even as the urgency of the command and the magnitude of the vision dawned on the population, a home-grown initiative emerged, with the Ministry of Education adopting the Bhutan Baccalaureate in 2021.

## **Druk Gyalpo's Institute**

The Bhutan Baccalaureate is developed by the Druk Gyalpo's Institute through its three centres - the Education Research Centre, the Teacher Development Centre and The Royal Academy. His Majesty The King granted the Royal Charter for Druk Gyalpo's Institute (DGI) on 8 September 2021. The Institute's origins date back to 2010 when the Royal command for the establishment of The Royal Academy was granted to honour the vision, leadership, and legacy of His Majesty the Fourth King. The Institute highlights His Majesty The King's recognition of the critical role of education in enriching the lives of Bhutanese citizens, nurturing successive generations of leaders, and bridging social and economic disparities to build a just and harmonious society.

The Education Research Centre leads the development of the Bhutan Baccalaureate as an ever-evolving education system. With inputs from the Teacher Development Centre, The Royal Academy and other affiliated schools, the centre is responsible for the research and development activities of the Institute. These activities include the development of the learning process of the Bhutan Baccalaureate, curriculum research and development, publication and dissemination of works that are aligned with the objectives of the Institute, and the development of the Bhutan Baccalaureate examination and accreditation system.

The Royal Academy started in 2016 as the first school to implement the

Bhutan Baccalaureate. As of December 2023, The Royal Academy had 289 students and 30 teachers, catering to students from Grades 7 to 12. The Royal Academy maintains a student body that is representative of the national character, and socio-economic and cultural experiences. As pioneers in the development and implementation of the Bhutan Baccalaureate, the teachers and students of The Royal Academy play a pivotal role in the continuous evolution of the Bhutan Baccalaureate and its transition to other schools.

The Teacher Development Centre offers contextualised teacher training and enrichment programmes for educators in Bhutan and beyond. The centre works closely with the Oxford University Department of Education, Feuerstein Institute, Israel, Pallavan Learning Systems, India, and the Royal University of Bhutan's Colleges of Education, in designing and offering various programmes for teachers, trainee teachers and teacher graduates, principals and school leaders, Ministry of Education personnel and faculty members of the Colleges of Education in Bhutan.

### **The Bhutan Baccalaureate System**

The teachings of Guru Padmasambhava serve as the basis for the philosophy of the Bhutan Baccalaureate. At the heart of Guru Padmasambhava's teachings is the realisation of primordial wisdom (yeshey - ཡེ་ཤེས།), understood as the recognition of one's innate awakened state. Another important feature of Guru Padmasambhava's teachings is the practice of unearthing treasures (terma – གཏོར་མ།) at an appropriate time and place.

The Bhutan Baccalaureate is a system of education based on five areas of development: Cerebral, Emotional, Physical, Social and Spiritual. The Bhutan Baccalaureate strives to create a thriving learning environment for the development of persons of substance who can experience with confidence the manifold and multi-dimensional challenges and opportunities of a fast-changing world.

The Bhutan Baccalaureate recognises that every individual is unique, possessing distinct strengths, challenges and aspirations. The purpose of education is to help learners identify their treasures and actualise their ever-evolving inner potential through an individual and shared journey of introspection. In this endeavour, the Bhutan Baccalaureate learning

process begins within each individual and is understood as a journey of inner development, eventually leading outwards. The Bhutan Baccalaureate extends beyond the conventional one-size-fits-all approach to education and recognises the ability of each individual to become the best version of themselves by awakening their primordial wisdom.

## **Holistic Growth**

In his book, *Leading Out: The True Purpose of Education*, the director of the Druk Gyalpo's Institute, Arun Kapur, discusses the role of education in bringing out the best in every learner through the Five Areas of Development. The book highlights the role of education in the maturation process of a child into a young adult, enabling them to actualise their potential, make high-quality choices, live in harmony with nature, and understand the value of life.

The development of the Bhutan Baccalaureate began by collating responses from a cross-section of Bhutanese society to the question, "What do you want your children to learn?" The analysis of these responses formed the core of the Bhutan Baccalaureate's learning process, curriculum, assessment and reporting processes.

Five Areas of Development form the pillars of the Bhutan Baccalaureate. Cerebral development encompasses not only the acquisition of content knowledge but, more importantly, the development of the ability to learn. The cerebral area enables learners to develop skills and processes to interpret and critically analyse both pre-existing and new knowledge. Emotional development encourages learners to pay attention to their emotions in order to recognise, understand and express them positively and productively to channel their full potential. As learners develop emotionally, they build meaningful relationships with themselves and others around them and become aware of how their emotions affect their learning in other areas of development.

Physical development is not only limited to the development of motor skills through physical activities but focuses on overall health and well-being while emphasising fitness and sports. Social development encourages learners to develop a deep understanding of themselves and their role in society as constructive, contributory citizens. By helping learners

develop wholesome relationships with peers, adults, communities, and the environment, the social area enables learners to become trustworthy members of a community, always conducting themselves with integrity. Spiritual development focuses on the discovery of innate goodness and enables learners to become virtuous human beings as they work towards creating a just and harmonious society. It comprises components such as self-awareness and identity, meaning and purpose of life, inner goodness, and beyond self and others.

### **The Bhutan Baccalaureate Learning Process**

The learning process is designed to help each student “learn to learn” and take ownership of that learning as they develop Skills, Processes, Watermarks, and Domain Knowledge. Skills are the mechanisms to interpret, process, and make sense of existing and new knowledge. The manner in which the learner acquires skills and knowledge is termed Processes. Watermarks are the impact of the learning environment on a learner’s character and values, such as integrity, compassion, rigour, and leadership. Domain Knowledge is the subject matter content. This process of learning must help students adapt to the needs of the present and the future.

Getting to know the student is imperative for making learning effective and meaningful. Therefore, the backstory of each student - their experiences, strengths, challenges and aspirations - is integral to their learning journey. By incorporating students’ backstories, the learning process is not constrained to a standardised model of teaching but, rather, contextualised to meet the ever-changing needs of the learner and the world around them. Their backstories lead to the design of individual roadmaps of the learners, targeted to achieve their goals and aspirations across the Five Areas of Development. In their individual roadmaps, learners set clear indicators of success, holding themselves accountable for their own growth and encouraging themselves to constantly raise the bar.

### **Validation of the Bhutan Baccalaureate**

In 2021, the Ministry of Education and Skills Development decided to implement the Bhutan Baccalaureate in 22 schools across the country. This decision was further reinforced by the directives of the Prime Minister of Bhutan on September 10, 2021, to adopt the educational practices of the

Druk Gyalpo's Institute for broader school education reforms.

The Bhutan BaccaLaureate has been recognised as one of the 100 most inspiring educational innovations by HundrED, Finland since 2017. The Learning Process based on the Five Areas of Development has been acclaimed for its holistic approach and potential impact on student well-being and learning.

In 2021, a literature review conducted by the Oxford University Department of Education on major examination boards worldwide highlighted the uniqueness of the Bhutan BaccaLaureate in offering an original approach to learning for both students and teachers. Unlike other international models, it genuinely focuses on holistic learning within the entire school community, evolving as an organisation over time.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development launched the Schools+ Network in May 2023 as a platform for empowering schools to play an active role in leading improvements in education. Druk Gyalpo's Institute has been invited to be part of the first cohort of schools to launch the Schools+ Network.

To enable the leaders of tomorrow to embrace future opportunities, educational systems need to be in a constant state of development, adapting not only to the needs of the present but also those of an anticipated future. A central facet of the Bhutan BaccaLaureate is its dynamic and progressive nature. Its learning process and curriculum are continually reviewed and updated to mirror the changing aspirations of its community members, including students, parents, faculty and administrators. This integral feature of responsive growth allows the Bhutan BaccaLaureate to be contextualised to suit the needs of diverse communities both within and beyond Bhutan.

### **The Bhutan BaccaLaureate Introduced in the National Curriculum**

Introducing the Bhutan BaccaLaureate is aimed to be a transformation of the national education curriculum, teacher and school assessments, infrastructure, classroom spaces, and examination structures. After the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between the Ministry of Education and Skills Development (MoESD) and Druk Gyalpo's Institute, the Teacher Development Centre and the Education Research

Centre of the Druk Gyalpo's Institute led the transition of the Bhutan Bacculaureate Learning Process in the 22 schools. The schools are a mix of higher secondary, middle secondary, lower secondary and primary schools as well as day and residential schools.

In each school, this process began with the collection of the backstory of the school as well as the backstory of individual faculty members. Using these backstories, faculty members were taken through a process of internalising the Five Areas of Development: Cerebral, Emotional, Physical, Social, and Spiritual as individuals, before slowly transitioning into their role as teachers. As the transition progressed, faculty members were taken through the process of contextualising the Learning Process, including Backstories, Roadmaps, Domains, Mentorship, Learning Cycles and Assessment, resulting in the creation of the Learning Framework for the School.

The ongoing transition in the 22 schools covers approximately 1,100 teachers and 11,000 students. Teachers have enhanced their technological competencies and broadened their mindsets. Along with teachers, students have also started to place greater emphasis on holistic growth as compared with academic success alone. While the issue of limited human resources remains a significant challenge for these schools, the personal and professional growth opportunities for teachers have been enthusiastically welcomed.

The Co-ordinators of the Five Areas of Development, Domain Heads, Mentors, and Faculty of The Royal Academy continue to use their experiences to guide the teachers in the 22 schools to contextualise the Learning Process. A School Mentor from the DGI, well-versed in the philosophy and the learning process of the Bhutan Bacculaureate, also helps each school to contextualise the Bhutan Bacculaureate to their respective schools.

The Bhutan Bacculaureate is a major stride forward in His Majesty the King's goal of nation-building:

“Our generation is called upon to re-think, to re-define the true purpose of growth and, in doing so, to find a growth that is truly sustainable. We must never forget that, for lasting peace and happiness in this world, the journey forward has to be one that we

must all make together. No one should be left behind. This we must achieve without waiting for some great leader or genius, who may or may not ever emerge - we should instead seek to do so, each of us, on our own. As we become better human beings, we build better families, stronger communities, successful nations and a peaceful stable world for ourselves and our future generations. It all starts with the Leadership of the Self.”