

# A Case for Humanising Bhutanese Higher Education System

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*This paper highlights “Bhutanese exceptionalism”, which defines Bhutan, Bhutanese, and Bhutanese identity – none of which would exist without arts and humanities subjects in the education system. Unfortunately, the new higher education policy has little space for humanities and social sciences. Although the Royal vision for education is clear, recent reforms have side-lined humanities and social sciences in favour of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) subjects, further reinforcing an existing bias against humanities and social science education. This paper calls for promoting both STEM and SHAPE (Social sciences, Humanities, and the Arts for People and the Economy) subjects, without prioritising one over the other, to avoid the pitfalls of an imbalanced public education system and better equip the country to meet the challenges of the 21st century.*

## **What is “Bhutanese Exceptionalism”?**

In public talks, I often refer to “Bhutanese Exceptionalism”, which encapsulates the unique qualities that define Bhutan, Bhutanese, and our identity, setting ourselves apart from our northern and southern neighbours. These traits shape Bhutan as a nation and Bhutanese as a people.

For instance, imagine a man who believes that his land, village, homeland and country are the most sacred places on earth. To him, every inch of land, even those lost to British India in 1865 and now part of Assam and West Bengal, is sacred, blessed by Guru Padmasambhava. He sees the entire country as a holy landscape, adorned with timeless Buddhist monuments – temples, stupas and *mani*-walls – where natural forces like the wind are harnessed to fluttering prayer flags, and flowing water powers prayer wheels, not only hydropower turbines.

Imagine a Bhutanese travelling abroad for a few days. While he enjoys the experience and indulges in things not available in Bhutan, the moment the plane lands at Paro airport, he breathes a sigh of relief, feeling an overwhelming sense of home. He breathes the crisp Himalayan air. The

sight of the familiar landscape, houses, vegetation and people evokes a deep sense of belonging.

Similarly, think of a Bhutanese father who ensures his children's success by working tirelessly, depending often on borrowed money, to have his children care for him in his old age. Even when offered comfort in urban areas like Thimphu or Paro, an elderly Bhutanese father chooses to return to his village, his home, and the land he cultivated. He aims to live peacefully and die in his home village, content with a modest, traditional village funeral rather than being hastily moved from the hospital bed to the cremation ground.

Imagine the nation's capital, Thimphu, where instead of eliminating street dogs that bark and bite, and above all carry rabies, residents have space for them in their neighbourhoods. Imagine a poor family with barely enough for themselves, yet willing to offer what little they have to both worldly and spiritual causes.

Imagine a man, poverty etched into his face and clothes, whose life has been harsh and unfair, yet he blames no one but his karma. He strives to improve his karma, believing the next life is far more important than the present one.

Finally, consider the Indian border town of Jaigaon, where Bhutanese people buy live fish from Bengali fishermen in bulk and release them back into the rivers, even knowing the same fish might be caught and sold again the next day.

The above images capture the essence of the Bhutanese identity rooted in a deep connection to home, family and cultural values.

These images of Bhutanese life would be mere dreams if Bhutan loses the values that have sustained its village-based civilisation for over 1,500 years, without any colonial disruption. For Bhutan to remain a sovereign, independent nation into the 21st century and beyond - or "until the end of the present eon", as our ancestors would say - preserving and embodying these values in our lives is critical.

This preservation, however, is largely upheld by humanities education, while other disciplines tend to do the reverse. Bhutanese exceptionalism risks being lost if education policies continue to prioritise science over humanities.

A 2016 exit survey of tourists revealed that nearly half (48%) visited Bhutan for its culture and traditions, with nature and environment coming in a distant second at 18%. Adventure (11%), spiritual sites and activities (9%), and Gross National Happiness (8%), are followed by business (3%) or education-related reasons (3%).<sup>1</sup> This means 65% of the reasons tourists visit are tied to the humanities - culture, spirituality and GNH - dimensions that define Bhutan as a sovereign kingdom in the Himalayas. Without these, the country would have little else to offer.

When Bhutan re-opened to international travel in 2022 after the pandemic, visitors arriving at Paro airport were greeted with a surprise: The walls were adorned with colourful artworks, paintings and photographs. The airport looked like an art gallery. On His Majesty's command, around 60 members of the Voluntary Artists' Studio of Bhutan (VAST) spent their lockdown days transforming the airport, turning His Majesty's vision into reality. The space was filled with artworks inspired by Bhutanese culture, to enhance the happiness of the visitors. This was made possible by the arts and humanities which are now unfortunately given a stepmotherly treatment.

## A Clear Royal Vision

A Royal *Kasho*<sup>2</sup> (edict) on education reform, issued in 2021, presents a clear vision for the country's educational transformation. It calls for a radical transformation of the national education system to support a transition to a knowledge-based, tech-driven economy. While stressing the importance of equipping students with 21st-century competencies and integrating STEM subjects into their everyday learning, the *kasho* equally emphasises the holistic development of students to become caring, dependable, honest and patriotic citizens. It also highlights the need to ground students in Bhutan's history, culture, traditions and values. The ultimate goal of

1 Bhutan Tourism Council. Bhutan Tourism Monitor 2016 (Royal Government of Bhutan, 2016).

2 Royal Kashos on civil service and education, Kuensel, 2 February 2021. <https://kuenselonline.com/royal-kashos-on-civil-service-and-education/>

education, as stated by His Majesty, is to produce “globally competent, locally rooted” citizens.

### **STEM Subjects Matter**

STEM, encompassing Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics, emerged in the early 1990s to unify pure and applied sciences under one framework and harness it to address the challenges of the 21st century.

As the world becomes increasingly complex and technology-driven, the importance of STEM education is undeniable. STEM subjects have been prioritised in terms of funding and employment in education policy and curricula everywhere. Its importance needs no iteration. Many countries have made STEM the core of their national curricula.

In Bhutan, the focus on STEM began when the Western-style modern education system was introduced in the 1960s. It is reflected in the government scholarships provided for engineering and medicine.

### **SHAPE Subjects Also Matter**

A lopsided overemphasis on STEM subjects has led to the creation of SHAPE - Social Sciences, Humanities, and the Arts for People and the Economy. SHAPE aims to harness the collective power of these disciplines to shape a brighter and more prosperous future. It was born out of frustration with the lack of a unified narrative about the relevance of these fields.<sup>3</sup>

Just as STEM subjects are important, so are SHAPE subjects. Both focus on generating evidence, and much research, regardless of discipline, is shaped by the historical context, concerns, needs and values of the time and place in which it is conducted - this is where SHAPE excels.

A YouGov survey revealed that more people would choose SHAPE over STEM if they had to select a university course today. Students in SHAPE disciplines also report high levels of satisfaction, with humanities courses

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3 Julia Black, “STEM, STEAM and now SHAPE: Can an acronym help valorise the social sciences, humanities and arts?” Futurum. <https://futurumcareers.com/stem-steam-and-now-shape-can-an-acronym-help-valorise-the-social-sciences-humanities-and-arts>

consistently ranking highly in student surveys, according to Times Higher Education in 2019.

SHAPE graduates are in high demand, with eight of the 10 fastest-growing sectors in the UK - such as financial, legal, and professional services, information and communication, and the creative industries - employing more SHAPE graduates than those from other fields.<sup>4</sup>

Humanities subjects -- broadly, language, literature, the arts, history and philosophy -- help us understand ourselves and others, as well as the values by which people live today and have lived in the past. A critical and ethical framework to guide decision-making is essential in a world facing enormous challenges. The value of arts and culture to our sense of community and well-being has become especially clear during the pandemic.

When Eastern European countries and Russia sought to reform their education systems, which had previously served as State propaganda, they looked to the US and its liberal arts model for inspiration, valuing its focus on broad intellectual and ethical development.

However, true liberal arts education in the US, according to Liz Coleman,<sup>5</sup> does not exist, because of increasing specialisation that has replaced the broad, civic-minded education with a narrow focus on technical expertise. As a result, subjects have become fragmented, with more emphasis placed on learning increasingly specialised knowledge, despite the growing recognition of the interconnectedness of things.

## SHAPE and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Challenges

The Royal *Kasho* on education reform<sup>6</sup> calls for developing students' abilities in critical and creative thinking, fostering lifelong learning, and preparing them to be inquisitive, problem-solving, interactive, and collaborative. Many of these educational goals can be effectively fulfilled by SHAPE subjects.

4 The British Academy, "British Academy SHAPE Observatory". <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/policy-and-research/british-academy-shape-observatory/>

5 Liz Coleman. A call to reinvent liberal arts education [Video]. TED Talk. February 2009. [https://www.ted.com/talks/liz\\_coleman\\_a\\_call\\_to\\_reinvent\\_liberal\\_arts\\_education/transcript?subtitle=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/liz_coleman_a_call_to_reinvent_liberal_arts_education/transcript?subtitle=en)

6 Royal Kashos on civil service and education, Kuensel, 2 February 2021. <https://kuenselonline.com/royal-kashos-on-civil-service-and-education/>

SHAPE subjects, with their focus on creative thinking, inquisitiveness, problem-solving, interaction and collaboration, and self-discovery, are foundational to addressing complex contemporary issues.

Let me illustrate a couple of cases. SHAPE subjects can address the global problem of fake news<sup>7</sup> that distorts reality, and makes it challenging to detect and counteract misinformation. Developing critical thinking skills through SHAPE subjects is essential for recognising and mitigating the impact of misinformation. Critical thinking encourages individuals to examine, reflect, analyse and investigate information, fostering the resilience needed to navigate and counteract fake news.

The challenge of transiting to a sustainable, net-zero carbon economy is more social than technological.<sup>8</sup> STEM subjects alone are not enough to accelerate this transition. SHAPE subjects can offer valuable insights for driving societal and economic change, as technological advancements guided by current policies only lead to unsustainable practices without proper regulation. SHAPE subjects excel in providing a good understanding of how to influence policymakers to adopt the necessary policies, taxes and regulations for sustainability.

Furthermore, the “take, make, waste” linear economy prevalent in Western societies influences daily life and behaviour. Effective sustainable consumption solutions require integration into social and organisational contexts, aligning with norms, values and motivations that discourage unsustainable practices.

SHAPE subjects provide insights into human behaviour and its impact on the world. Addressing climate justice for developing countries which -- despite contributing minimally to historical emissions, are the most affected -- demands a deep understanding of international politics and resource conflicts, for which SHAPE subjects also excel.

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7 Ruxandra Buluc. “Critical Thinking in the Fight Against Fake News”. In *Mediating Globalization: Identities in Dialogue*. Edited by Boldea I., Buda D., & Sigmirean C. (Bucharest: Arhipelag XXI Press, 2018, 59-69.)

8 Eric Neumayer & Charles Joly. “Without social sciences, humanities and arts, the goal of sustainability may never be reached”, 2021. [blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2021/04/28/without-social-sciences-humanities-and-arts-the-goal-of-sustainability-may-never-be-reached/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2021/04/28/without-social-sciences-humanities-and-arts-the-goal-of-sustainability-may-never-be-reached/)

Percy Bysshe Shelley, in his essay “The Defence of Poetry”,<sup>9</sup> claimed that “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world”. What he meant was that poets, despite working outside the formal power structures, shape public opinion through their imaginative and creative expressions. According to Shelley, poets influence democracy and societal norms in non-threatening ways by critiquing social injustices and advocating for change.

Steve Jobs, the innovation guru, while emphasising creativity and innovation, advocated for a close collaboration between computer scientists, artists and designers.<sup>10</sup> He believed that the best ideas emerge from the intersection of technology and the humanities. He maintained that connecting diverse perspectives and approaches leads to ground-breaking innovations, a principle that sets his companies apart from most.

## **New Higher Education Policy**

In 2023, the Royal University of Bhutan (RUB) introduced a higher education policy that prioritised STEM over SHAPE subjects. Arts and humanities programmes were phased out from colleges. RUB streamlined some SHAPE courses, introduced new ones, and eliminated redundant courses mainly to improve graduate employability. RUB clarified that the decision was not to undermine the importance of arts and humanities, but rather to help graduates secure employment after graduation.

Sherubtse College discontinued eight bachelor’s degree programmes in 2023 - English, Media Studies, History, English and Dzongkha, Population and Development Studies, Geography, Environmental Science, Computer Science, and Statistics. Some of these programmes were restructured into three new bachelor’s degrees starting from the 2023 academic year: Bachelor’s degree in Digital Communications and Project Management, Data Science and Data Analytics, and Economics and Political Science.

Similarly, the College of Language and Culture Studies, which exclusively offers humanities programmes, phased out its Bachelor’s degree in Bhutan

9 Percy Bysshe Shelley. A Defence of Poetry (1821). Poetry Foundation. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69388/a-defence-of-poetry>

10 Jonah Lehrer, “Steve Jobs: “Technology Alone Is Not Enough””. The New Yorker. October 7, 2011. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/steve-jobs-technology-alone-is-not-enough>

& Himalayan Studies (BHS) in 2021 because of employment challenges faced by its graduates. Bachelor's degree programmes in Bhutanese Language & Literature (BLL) and Dzongkha & Culture Studies (BDCS) were also phased out in August 2023; only the Master's degree programme in *Chokey* and Dzongkha (MCD) is retained.

Unlike Sherubtse College, the College of Language and Culture Studies has not introduced new courses; instead, RUB is reportedly working on repurposing programmes to align with evolving workplace skill requirements and broaden educational programmes.

Fortunately, two private colleges affiliated with RUB - Norbuling Rigtser College (NRC) and The Royal Thimphu College (RTC) - are continuing to offer SHAPE programmes.<sup>11</sup> Those SHAPE programmes phased out from RUB are being transferred to RTC and NRC.

The students pursuing SHAPE subjects will no longer receive government funding for their undergraduate studies, which was previously offered on a competitive basis. This has created an inequality issue as STEM students can still access government scholarships at RUB colleges while SHAPE students must pay for private education at RTC and NRC.

The policy intentions are clear but they have unintended consequences for students, parents, and the nation. One of the primary goals of education is to prepare individuals for employment, but reducing the whole education enterprise to fulfill this sole objective overlooks its broader, holistic, multi-dimensional nature. Imagine the consequence of entrusting the care of an old monastery housing invaluable relics to a hedge fund manager whose education is bereft of any values provided by a liberal arts education.

## **Policy Contradictions**

The government changed the education policy to provide free education up to Class XII. From 2021, all students who passed Class X could continue their study without having to meet the cut-off requirements, as was the case up to that point. But who could and would argue against a policy that opened secondary education to all students, even if it violated the Constitutional

<sup>11</sup> K.P. Sharma, "Will the private college offer Arts and Humanities programmes? Kuensel, April 1, 2023. <https://kuenselonline.com/will-the-private-colleges-offer-arts-and-humanities-programmes/>



provision to provide free public education up to Class X? For the first time after more than 60 years of public education, the government abolished the cut-off point that made post-secondary education competitive.

Three years later, the RUB announced its higher education policy. Irrespective of RUB's discontinuation of free competitive SHAPE programmes, the Ministry of Education and Skills Development (MoESD) continues to offer SHAPE subjects for Classes 10 and 12 students.

Meanwhile, the MoESD has recruited teachers from India to teach STEM subjects. Schools across the country have come up with various strategies to make STEM attractive to students. A school in Trashiyangtse, for example, has designed a three-metre wooden rocket to inspire the younger generation to take interest in STEM. Things are going right with STEM.

But it is not without even short-term problems. The problems of the new higher education policy were brought up in the parliament for discussion. Some MPs raised problems on behalf of parents and students who have already been affected or are going to be affected.<sup>12</sup>

One question is whether students should be allowed to choose their courses based on their aptitudes and interests, rather than imposing subjects based on national priorities. Some schools have reported a decline in arts stream enrolment, with students opting for Commerce or Science, even if they were not interested, with hopes for better future opportunities. There are already disparaging remarks regarding humanities degrees.

### **Unbalanced Education Policy: A Lesson**

Ever since the Third King decided to provide free public education to Bhutanese children, STEM subjects have received preferential treatment. To meet the demands of the time, students were sent abroad to study STEM subjects, and this policy continued with scholarships for Class XII students given primarily for STEM subjects. Although a few scholarships for social sciences have been introduced, the results of this myopic policy are evident today.

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<sup>12</sup> Yangyel Lhaden, "Education reforms questioned in National Assembly", Kuensel, May 29, 2021. <https://kuenselonline.com/education-reforms-questioned-in-national-assembly/>

After over 60 years of free public education, Bhutan lacks several key humanities and social science professionals. There is not a single economist with a PhD to manage the macro-economic health of the economy. There are no locally trained historians, no archaeologists in the civil service to professionally excavate and interpret our past, no professional musicians skilled in Western instruments, and no professional translator capable of translating between Dzongkha and English at a professional standard, let alone classical Tibetan.

Despite emphasising Bhutan's unique culture, tradition and heritage, which play a significant role in constructing national identity and promoting nationhood, there is no professional musicologist, professional museum curator, or folk artist even as the country relies on the tourism sector for foreign exchange.

The National Museum of Bhutan, established in 1968, has seen minimal growth, with only two additional museums - the Royal Heritage Museum in Trongsa and the Folk Heritage Museum in Thimphu - all established through Royal patronage. In contrast, China registered 382 new museums in 2022 alone, New York City has 170 museums, and Nepal has 50.

These shortcomings highlight the consequences of prioritising STEM education at the expense of social sciences and humanities in the free public education system.

### **What Can be Done? What Should be Done?**

A press release from the opposition party in the parliament urged the government to restructure and retain arts and humanities courses, using this quote: "Science without humanities creates a society without morals, and humanities without science fails to innovate society" to buttress its argument that both science and humanities are essential for nation-building and advancing human civilisation.

While STEM subjects are crucial, they should not be promoted at the expense of SHAPE subjects, whose significance and contribution remain unrecognised. Imagine Bhutan without Buddhist monuments, scriptures, arts and crafts. Imagine the situation if the 13 arts and crafts knowledge

that form the basis of Bhutanese material culture are lost due to our myopic education policy.

The national policy should provide equal opportunities for students to study both STEM and SHAPE subjects rather than the government tilting the balance in favour of STEM. It is essential to respect the choices of students and parents between STEM and SHAPE subjects. When the higher education system dismisses one field as inferior, it has far-reaching consequences.

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