

# Non-Formal Education - Learning Never Ceases

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## Background

The Non-Formal Education (NFE) programme in Bhutan was introduced in 1990. It was initiated by the National Women's Association of Bhutan (NWAB) by Royal Command during the 53<sup>rd</sup> National Assembly, mainly to empower Bhutanese women. Recognising its importance, the responsibility of overseeing the programme was entrusted to the Dzongkha Development Commission (DDC) in 1992 and 1993. However, in 1994, with the additional mandate to provide functional literacy and numeracy to the youths and adults who had missed out on formal schooling, the Inspectorate of Schools of the Department of Education took charge of the programme.

As the Non-Formal Education (NFE) programme grew in popularity and scope the Non-Formal and Continuing Education Division (NFCED) was created in 2004, under the Department of Adult and Higher Education, Ministry of Education. NFCED has three objectives:

- To raise the functional literacy levels of the adult population above the current 66.6 percent (BLSS, 2017);
- To provide opportunity for aspiring learners to continue their education and be integrated into mainstream education; and
- To improve the people's ability to increase their income, personal knowledge and enhance their understanding of the national identity and culture.

The NFE programme aims to help illiterate learners who are 15 years and above who could not pursue formal education. The NFE programme has three levels: Basic Literacy Course (BLC); Post Literacy Course (PLC); and Community Learning Centre (CLC). BLC is a 12-month long course that provides functional literacy which is equivalent to Grade VI Dzongkha in the formal education system. BLC graduates should be able to converse

in Dzongkha at a basic level, read Kuensel (the national newspaper) and signboards on the street, and read and write simple messages. Upon successful completion of the BLC, graduates progress on to PLC, a 12-month which covers both Dzongkha and functional English. “Para-literates” such as school drop outs, nuns, *gomchens* (lay monks), etc., are also encouraged to enroll in the PLC to achieve basic literacy. Then in 2003, the Community Learning Centre (CLC) was introduced to develop vocational skills to equip the BLC and PLC graduates learners with livelihood skills for self-learning and lifelong learning. According to the Annual Education Statistics, 2018, Bhutan had 560 NFE centres with over 6,017 learners, out of which 1,788 were male and 4,229 were female.

Besides providing functional literacy and livelihood skills, NFECD initiated the Continuing Education (CE) programme in 2006 to encourage lifelong learning and career enhancement for those who could not continue their school education but aspire to make up for it by pursuing further education through evening classes.

**Diversity of Learners and Learning Environment - Learning Never Ceases**  
From the very beginning the NFE programme was popular as it reached out to the section of the population which had missed out on getting a formal education for numerous reasons. About 70 percent of the learners were women - housewives, farmers, day labourers and some school support staff – who aspired to read and write, read sign boards and religious scriptures, participate in local elections, establish small businesses, be able to utilise information and make informed decisions.

Although the learners, as old as 60 to as young as 18, have a wide range of learning abilities, they are passionate about learning new things. At the beginning, some even struggle to hold a pencil; thus the instructor has to start with hand coordination. NFE classes are conducted in any available space: temporary bamboo huts constructed by the learners, village *lhakhangs* (monastery), rented village houses, *gewog* (block) town halls, instructors' houses, school classrooms, prisons, and the armed force's campuses. In some cases, learners are fortunate enough to have the use of classrooms which are ideal for teaching and learning. As many of the learners usually work in the fields or at home tending to their families during the day, the classes are conducted in the evenings. After a hard day's work, they come to class, eager to learn.

## **NFE Instructors – the Light That Ignites Hope**

The success of the NFE programme largely lies in the hands of the instructors who help the adult citizens learn and eventually become socially and economically independent. When the NFE programme first started, the instructors were ex-teachers, village lamas/*lopons* (pastors) or anyone who had passed Grade VIII. Over time, the curriculum was adapted to incorporate the changing the social and economic circumstances. As a result, the minimum entry requirement to qualify as an instructor was changed to Grade X in 2002 and from 2012, this was raised to Grade XII.

Currently, there are approximately 544 instructors of whom 45 percent are Grade X graduates, 54 percent are Grade XII graduates, and a few monks and Grade VIII graduates. The 392 female instructors and 152 male instructors teach in urban centres and in remote corners throughout all the 20 *dzongkhags* (districts) in the country.

## **Impact of Non-Formal Education**

Non-Formal Education has been a huge success story in the country. The programme has transformed the lives of 203,471 learners who now have basic literacy and numeracy skills, as well as better values and life skills, and a greater ability to earn a living. Two Major Impacts of the NFE programme:

### **1. Empowerment of Illiterate Bhutanese Citizens**

The NFE Review Report 2015 highlights how the programme has benefitted its learners:

- Able to read and write;
- Take better care of their families;
- Perform simple calculations;
- Help and guide their children and siblings in studies;
- Gain ideas and confidence in establishing small businesses; and
- Participate in Local Government elections.

For many learners, being able to read Dzongkha has improved their knowledge and understanding of many issues which include living a healthier lifestyle, eating more nutritious food, and engaging meaningfully in social and economic activities. Being able to recite prayers, taking part in religious activities with confidence, reading signboards to navigate, reading newspapers and interacting more competently in society, are all positive outcomes.

The programme has also encouraged and empowered many to contribute to nation building by participating in LG elections. In 2016, 343 NFE graduates took part in Local Government elections, out of whom 121 were elected. Among the elected, four were *gups*, (block headman) eight were *mangmis* (assistant block headman) and 191 were *tshogpas* (village coordinator). Out of the eight *mangmis*, one was female and of the total elected *tshogpas*, 95 were male and 14 were female. Many NFE graduates go on to vocational skills training in the CLC and have established their own tailoring shops, work in companies, or run businesses from home.

## **2. Contributing to a Gross National Happiness**

NFE is a vital component of the development of Gross National Happiness (GNH) in Bhutan. Incorporated within the series of Five-Year Plans (FYP) to achieve GNH the NFE programme addresses the nine domains. The NFE has improved the living standards of the people through literacy, strengthened community vitality by bringing people together, given access to education through lifelong learning opportunities, strengthened ecological diversity and resilience, enhanced cultural diversity and resilience, improved health standards, time use, psychological well-being, and good governance.

In recognition of Bhutan's efforts in creating life-long learning opportunities and enhancing literacy, the programme has been awarded the Honorary Mention of the UNESCO Confucius Award in 2009 and the International Confucius Award in 2012. Words of Appreciation from the Learners:

“Finally daylight has arrived in our lives. Learning is so much fun. I feel happy learning how to write letters. I am a complete human now.”

## Challenges

Although the NFE programme has been a huge success in reaching the unreached sections of the population, it is grappling with a number of challenges.

- **Reaching the Unreached Population**

Given the mountainous terrain of the country, any development work that aims to reach scattered communities in hard-to-reach places poses a challenge and that includes the setting up of new NFE centres. Small, isolated villages might not have enough potential learners to form a cohort. As a result, there is still a significant number of rural villagers who are unable to get access to the NFE programme, thus missing out on enhancing their literacy skills and the capacity to increase their income.

- **Job Status of the NFE Instructors**

NFE instructors are employed on a temporary basis. Their job security is not guaranteed and depends very much on there being another cohort of learners wanting to enroll. This instability is a challenge for the instructors who would then, understandably, leave for better opportunities elsewhere. Consequently, this has a bearing on the availability of instructors to run the programmes and the quality of the teaching and this ultimately affects the learners.

- **Training of NFE Instructors**

Training takes place on two levels: (1) Training of Trainers (ToT) by the NFCED (2) Trainers training Instructors. The training is conducted at the national level by the NFCED and at the cluster-based level by the *dzongkhags* and *thromdes* (municipality). Unlike formal teacher training, which takes between one to four years, NFE instructors undergo a 10-day pre-service orientation before they are employed and while they are in service, they may also participate in annual refresher workshops.

The Review Report 2015 cites that one of the disadvantages of this limited training, which focuses mainly on teaching skills, is that has little effect on increasing the competency and capability of the instructors.

To encourage potential learners who show an interest and enroll in the programme, NFE academic sessions start whenever there are enough learners to form a cohort. In these cases, a newly recruited instructor might have to forego the crucial pre-service orientation and start the class which might, in turn, affect the quality of the teaching. Yet another challenge is that although the *dzongkhags* and *thromdes* are required to offer the pre-service orientation to the new instructors, funding might not be available.

- **High Dropout Rate**

The NFE policy requires that there be at least eight learners before a new centre is considered in operation. At times, as many as 20 learners may register for a new programme but they gradually drop out for various reasons: labour shortage in the farms; family problems; domestic disagreements; health issues; relocation of a spouse and the loss of interest. In addition, ‘The Review Report 2015’, documented that the lack of competency of the instructors and the quality of the teaching also contributed to the dropout rate. Other challenges faced include encouraging potential learners to take up the programmes and when they do sign on, to keep them motivated to complete the course.

- **Monitoring Support and Evaluation Mechanism**

There is a well-defined mechanism in place to monitor and evaluate the quality of the teaching and learning. The monitoring is carried out at the ministry, *dzongkhag*, school and *gewog* levels and has two aspects: the quantitative side which captures enrollment, attendance and syllabus coverage, etc; and then the qualitative aspect that aims to address and enhance learning. While the NFCED monitors the centres in the *dzongkhags*, the *dzongkhag* officials monitor the centres in their jurisdiction twice a year, as is required by the NFE Operational Guidelines 2018. Currently, however, only the quantitative aspect of the monitoring is being carried out. Although the *gups* and *tshogpas*, together with *dzongkhag* education officials and principals, are required to carry out the qualitative aspects, this is not adequately done because of various problems: financial

and time constraints; the stakeholders are not visiting the NFE centres at all; and those who visit are not focusing on the quality of the teaching. Another issue is that the collection of data is done manually at all the different levels - central, *dzongkhag*, and NFE centres. The process is time consuming and results in a lot of paperwork and delays in getting reliable, timely information. Furthermore, there is no proper database developed for the NFE programme so in-depth analysis and reporting is very difficult.

## Looking Into the Future

The Non-Formal Education programme aims to achieve 100 percent literacy rate by 2030. Along the way, the programme aims to ignite in its learners a passion for lifelong learning, develop skills for personal growth, and be able to adapt to the ever- changing needs of the economy and the nation. The NFE draft National Education Policy (NEP) requires the NFE programme to enhance access to literacy, numeracy, and vocational skills considering learners' economic circumstances, gender, disabilities, and educational needs. The NFE Equivalency Framework is thus developed to create flexible pathways and equality among formal, non-formal, and vocational education in learning and in the development of skills. It also aims to improve the quality of the NFE programme to make it attractive and credible.

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