

Vocational Education in Bhutan

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Introduction

The Royal Government of Bhutan accords the highest priority to the education sector as it believes that the country's quality of health, prosperity, happiness and progression hinges on the quality of its education. In the early 1960s, modern education with English as the medium of instruction was introduced, supplementing the country's age-old monastic form of education. Since then the modern education system has been instrumental in producing a generation of nation builders who have contributed to the country's current state of socio-economic development.

However, the system is now grappling with the challenges of change as it seeks to further enhance the quality, equity, system efficiencies and access to the education system at all levels. To address those challenges and deliver high quality, wholesome education to young Bhutanese, the Ministry of Education had, since 2014, initiated reforms to streamline and strengthen the structure of the school systems, curriculum, assessment, and teacher competencies (MoE, 2014).

The central idea behind the reform initiatives is to create an education system that efficiently delivers the required knowledge, skills and talents for the youths of Bhutan and instill in them the positive qualities of responsibility, resourcefulness and productivity so that they could live up to the ideals of the nation's visions and policies. Article 9.15 of The Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan articulates that the state shall endeavour 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 the opening page of the Bhutan Education Blueprint 2014-2024; His Majesty Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck stated that "education is empowering - it's a social equaliser and it facilitates self-discovery, which leads to realising one's full potential".

The National Education Framework takes this further and advocates the creation of “highly skilled citizens capable of responding to the emerging global challenges”. The Bhutan Education Blueprint 2014-2024 (2014) emphasises the importance that Bhutanese students be equipped with both the country’s traditional and contemporary knowledge to enable them to lead a productive and meaningful life.

Therefore, to give students access to high quality, alternative pathways in education that would correspond with their learning aptitude and to meet the demands of the industrial sector, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) is essential. Making TVET available will enhance the students’ employment prospects and address the national demand for skilled manpower (MoE, 2017). Therefore, the Ministry of Education has embarked on the creation of an alternative pathway to education by initiating TVET education programmes in mainstream schools, from Primary through to Class XII.

This paper will critically examine the policy decisions behind the establishment of TVET, analyse some of the current challenges, and conclude with some recommendations.

Challenges: the Place of TVET in the Current Education System

Bhutan’s education system, as it is now, consists of seven years of primary education from PP-VI, which includes one year of pre-primary, and six years of secondary education from grades VII – XII (MoE, 2014). Pre-primary to grade X education is provided free, as per the Constitutional mandate. Based on their academic merit, students who have completed grade X may continue on to grades XI and XII in either government or private higher secondary schools which are under the Ministry of Education (MoE), or join a certificate-level technical and vocational training institutes under the Ministry of Labour and Human Settlement (MoLHR).

The school and curriculum structure in Bhutan’s education system is arranged in five key stages as follows (MoE, 2014):

- Key Stage I: PP-III – Dzongkha, English, Mathematics, Environmental Studies, Health and Physical Education, Arts;

- Key Stage II: IV-VI – Dzongkha, English, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, Health and Physical Education;
- Key Stage III: VII – VIII – Dzongkha, English, Mathematics, Science, History, Geography, Health and Physical Education;
- Key Stage IV: IX-X – Dzongkha, English, Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, History and Geography;
- Electives: Economics, Computer Application, Agriculture and Food Security, Vocational Skills Development Curriculum;
- Key Stage V: XI – XII - Dzongkha, English, Physics, Chemistry, Commerce and Accountancy; and
- Electives: Geography, History, Mathematics, Biology, Computer Studies, Business and English Literature.

The above curricular structure indicates that although TVET programmes are offered as electives in mainstream senior secondary schools, they are implemented as co-curricular programmes in the form of “Clubs”. At present, there is no national certification system for these school electives. As a result, there are no avenues for equivalency or credit transfer systems between the academic scores acquired in the board exams and MoLHR’s national certification system. Hence, students who complete these vocational electives do not progress seamlessly onto TVET programmes offered at tertiary institutions.

The absence of a national certification system for TVET programmes in schools has also had a negative effect on the employability of the secondary school graduates looking for jobs in the industrial sector. As a result, teachers and students alike regard vocational electives as having little practical value in enabling a student to earn a living or move on to tertiary education, thereby contributing to the shortage of skilled manpower in the country.

Furthermore, there is a lack of clarity of the role and/or a replication of functions amongst the various agencies, such as the Ministry of Education (MoE), the Ministry for Works and Human Settlement (MoLHR) and the

Royal University of Bhutan (RUB) in the oversight of TVET education. The Ministry of Education, as the custodian of all educational programmes in the country must be the sole agency that is responsible for standards and the delivery of all educational services and its outcomes in the country. This should apply to TVET education as well. Currently, MoLHR oversees TVET education at the Diploma level, while RUB supervises TVET education at the tertiary level. Such marked divisions of roles amongst the agencies have contributed to the lack of cohesion in terms accreditation and certification systems, curricular and pedagogical delivery and the allocation of resources, thus negatively impacting policy and practice that affect TVET education nationwide.

The Reform: Opportunities for TVET

The role of education is not only to impart literacy and numeracy skills to learners, but also to ensure that they are creative, innovative and enterprising as well as employable. Diversified educational programmes that can be made available and adapted to suit the needs of individual learners will serve as a social leveler and help alleviate poverty. In sum, education should empower individuals to become responsible and productive citizens and spur the national economy towards progress and prosperity.

Thus, in order to fulfill the sacred mission of educational equity and meet the demands for skilled manpower in the market economy, it is timely that the Ministry of Education is launching TVET programmes in mainstream schools and bringing about the following structural reforms:

Key Stage I: Primary (IV to VI) - All schools to run vocational clubs to introduce students to the vocational education programmes delivered through a framework provided by the Royal Education Council (REC). This will allow students to study the subjects of their interest, and have an aptitude in, and build a foundation for higher technical and vocational training courses.

Key Stage II: VII – VIII - All schools will have pre-vocational orientation programmes that will prepare students for the world of vocational education. There will be theoretical and basic practical lessons on TVET delivered through a curriculum developed by REC. This will help the

students understand the diverse career opportunities available in technical and vocational fields and encourage them to pursue vocational subjects of their interest and aptitude to and equip them with the required skills.

Key Stage III: IX – XII - Schools will have vocational programmes offered as elective subjects like Agriculture, Media Literacy, and ICT subjects delivered through a curriculum provided by the Royal Education Council (REC). This would help students develop essential skills and prepare them to embrace creativity, for future planning, and design and innovation when they are gainfully employed in the technical and vocational fields.

It is worth noting that the new reforms in the structure of TVET delivery would herald the following opportunities:

- Provide alternative pathways to children through the diversification of subjects made available in a demand-driven curriculum;
- Facilitate mobility between technical/vocational and general education with multiple entry and exit options;
- Foster innovation, entrepreneurship and nurture creativity in children to generate diverse opportunities for socio economic development; and
- Provide opportunities for students to understand Bhutanese culture better by learning traditional arts and crafts through interdisciplinary approaches.

Recommendations

Keeping in view the challenges that might potentially disrupt the implementation of TVET programmes, the following recommendations are made to enable a seamless transition of TVET into the mainstream education system:

- The Royal Government of Bhutan could commission a detailed assessment to determine the effectiveness of the current institutional arrangements pertaining to TVET education and transfer all educational roles, including TVET education, up to secondary education or its

equivalent to the Ministry of Education. The MoLHR could then become a facilitating agency for job creations and recruitment for the TVET graduates.

- The Royal University of Bhutan should focus solely on offering TVET education at the tertiary levels.
- Establish a separate, neutral and transparent Bhutan Accreditation Council to be the premier authority for all accreditation and certification of training programmes in the country.
- Diversify and upscale the TVET curricular and pedagogical standards to ensure that it is enticing and relevant, meet expectations and prepare students for their dream jobs and gain social acceptance and respect.
- Ensure a seamless vertical and horizontal curricular and pedagogical progression from and within the school TVET programmes through to the tertiary level. Institutionalise a national certification system and accreditation for the school TVET programmes so that students could transition to jobs after they graduate.
- RGoB to provide comprehensive ideological, financial and logistical support and state-of-the-art resources to enable Bhutanese TVET graduates to find a productive niche anywhere in the world.

Conclusion

The creation of alternative TVET pathways from senior primary through to senior secondary levels in schools will widen the avenues for children to tap their innate potentials. It will also enable the schools to groom them with the required skills and knowledge and help the country harness its human resources. This will ultimately contribute towards the nation's economic growth and social development.

Thus, an alternative TVET pathway to education can be instrumental in expanding opportunities for the youth - the most vibrant and dynamic human resource in Bhutan.