

When Bhutanese Study Outside

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For centuries, Bhutan remained remote from the rest of the world due both to its mountainous topography and its desire to protect itself from outside influence and interference. But in the last half of the 20th century the country began to permit, as well as to seek, more international contact and that trend continues today. The primary driver of this change was the government's recognition of the importance of educating Bhutanese citizens at a time when there was little educational infrastructure in the country outside of the monasteries and the key reason for government scholarships for international study today continues to be "to address the shortage of human resources in the critical need areas".¹

But education in another country provides not only specific knowledge and skills. It also provides exposure to a different culture that may well have its own profound impact in areas ranging from individual's sense of self to their patterns of behaviour. Consistent with this volume's goal of looking at education beyond the formal education system, this paper explores how Bhutanese college students are impacted personally by exposure to very different cultures during their undergraduate years beyond what they learn through a specific course of study abroad.

International exposure during the undergraduate years is increasing for Bhutanese, with several thousand studying abroad through self-funding in addition to the roughly 200 selected by the government each year for international scholarships. Young Bhutanese are increasingly going abroad for jobs as well. Furthermore, Bhutan's tertiary educational institutions are increasingly providing their students with international exposure. For example, RUB brings students from Naropa University in the USA to some of its member colleges for a semester and students from the EU and the University of New England in Australia for shorter-term visits. In addition, Royal Thimphu College (RTC) has brought international students to its campus, for a semester or more, from countries in Asia, as well as from Europe, the Middle East, North America and Africa. During its first decade, it has also sent more than 225 Bhutanese students abroad to Europe and the U.S. as well as to many Asian countries, primarily on short-term cultural exchanges or for competitions of various sorts.

¹Ministry of Education, Royal Government of Bhutan, Undergraduate Scholarship Operational Guidelines. p.4 http://www.dahe.gov.bt/images/pdf/UG_Scholarship_Operational_Guidelines_-_2017.pdf

International experience influences students well beyond the academic knowledge or technical skills they gain. Specifically, numerous studies conclude that long-term (a semester or more) study in other countries impacts areas ranging from foreign language proficiency to self-and intercultural-understanding to civic engagement and career outcomes.² This is not surprising, as long-term programmes give individuals the opportunity for extensive exposure to other cultures with the potential that brings for reflection and personal growth. As short-term international programmes have become increasingly common, a modest number of studies have begun to suggest that they too may have a significant positive impact on students in domains ranging from intercultural sensitivity to better understanding of global interdependence.³ However, such conclusions are based almost exclusively on research involving students from the US, Europe, and Australia, typically studying in other Western cultural contexts.

Thus, it seems unwise to generalise from them to the likely impact of similar programmes on Bhutanese students. First, there are larger cultural differences between Bhutan and such countries than between the US, Europe, and Australia. This may well influence the experiences' impacts. Second, differences in levels of development between students' home country and the host nation might well also influence the effect that such an experience has. Concern about whether Bhutanese students may be dazzled by the evident prosperity of more developed countries or seduced by it into assuming that such countries' cultures are preferable to Bhutanese culture is not unrealistic as suggested by the popularity of jeans and Korean music and hair styles among urban Bhutanese youth.

Unfortunately, research on the impact of international exposure on students has almost completely ignored the question of how it may impact their sense of national identity and closely related issues, their appreciation of their own culture, their interest in working and living outside of their home country, and the like. But such issues are extremely important in the Bhutanese context.

²R. Michael Paige, et al. 2009. Study abroad for global engagement. *Intercultural Education*, v. 20sup1, S29-S44, DOI10.1080/14675980903370847 <https://doi.org/10.1080/14675980903370847>

³Kyoung-Ah Nam, 2011. Intercultural development in the short-term study abroad context. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/272622813_Intercultural_Development_in_the_Short-Term_Study-Abroad_Context_A_Comparative_Case_Study_Analysis_of_Global_Seminars_in_Asia_Thailand_and_Laos_and_Europe_Netherlands

Thus, it was decided to conduct a survey of about two dozen RTC students who had participated in college-organised international programmes to developed countries to see if and how their experiences influenced them. To help develop specific questions for the survey, a subset of these students were interviewed regarding their thoughts on the areas in which the international experience had an impact on them and their peers.

Then, all students still on campus who had visited the USA or Japan on short-term RTC-related programmes were asked to anonymously complete a survey the impact of that experience on them. The qualitative questions inquired, first, about the most important impact of the experience on the students and, second, about how, if at all, the experience influenced their views of Bhutan, its culture, and/or their identity as a Bhutanese. Overall, exposure to both Japan and the USA appeared to increase students appreciation of Bhutanese culture, their sense that being Bhutanese is very central to who they are, their pride in being Bhutanese, and their valuing of things that are characteristic of Bhutan such as its environment, monasteries, GNH, and the like.

The qualitative responses suggested that the admiration shown for Bhutan in Japan and the USA made students proud of things they had thought little about or not valued highly before. “In our country most of the students disrespect our culture and try to be more Korean...” one student wrote. “Only after visiting Japan I came to know that the Japanese people value our culture more than us...I love teaching my classmates... that being Bhutanese is the greatest, so we should not ignore our culture.” Similarly, in one of the pre-survey interviews, a female student said that she used to routinely wear jeans and a tee-shirt to go into Thimphu town, but now she usually wears a kira because the reaction in the USA to her kira was so positive that she now feels proud to wear it. A number of students also mentioned having observed that, elsewhere, people seemed too busy to spend time on close relationships as students valued and enjoyed doing in Bhutan.

At the same time that students reported an enhanced appreciation for Bhutanese culture, environment, and life style, they also indicated that their international experience substantially increased their desire to study and work outside Bhutan for at least a few years. They also reported a very modest increase in their desire to live outside Bhutan permanently.

Perhaps contributing to these findings, and consistent with existing research on international exposure for students,⁴ they also reported clearly increased comfort when interacting with non-Bhutanese and an increased ability to do so effectively. Consistent with these results, comments regarding newfound ease with and/or interest in cross-cultural experiences were one of the two most frequent responses to the qualitative question about the most important impact of the international experience on the students.

Culture is a very broad concept, including not only traditions and material artifacts but also ways of experiencing the world and interacting with others. Interestingly, although students reported increased appreciation for Bhutanese culture, there were some indications that international experience influenced them in a manner that was not totally consistent with traditional behavioral norms for young people. For example, the most frequent response to the qualitative question about the international experiences most important effect was a reported increase in self-confidence. Consistent with this, quantitative responses suggested a substantial increase in self-confidence, independence and willingness to say what they think, although there was essentially no reported change in shyness.

Traditional Bhutanese values include an emphasis on interdependence and politeness⁵, which are not always consistent with independence and saying what one thinks, especially when interacting with those in authority. However, the government's emphasis on the importance of entrepreneurship, as a route to decreasing unemployment as well as recent efforts to move toward greater national self-sufficiency, suggest that these characteristics may be increasingly useful given Bhutan's rapidly changing social and economic circumstances as well as the advent of democracy.

⁴Irvine Clarke et al (2009). Student intercultural proficiency from study abroad programmes. *Journal of Marketing Education*, v. 31(2), pp. 173-181. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0273475309335583>

⁵Tashi Wangyal (2001). Ensuring social sustainability: Can Bhutan's educational system ensure intergenerational transmission of values? *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, v. 3(1), pp. 106- 131.

In sum, these students reported that even their very short-term experiences in developed countries had a substantial impact on them. Contrary to possible concerns that exposure to developed countries may undermine Bhutanese youth's attachment to their own country and its culture, students generally reported an increased sense of national identity and increased valuation appreciation of Bhutanese culture while, at the same time, they became more interested in studying or working abroad. Of course, how long such changes will last, and whether and how they will ultimately impact behaviour is an open question, one that deserves further attention given the increasing numbers of Bhutanese who go the other countries for study and work.