

Education as a Means, Not End: Perspectives from Nepal

**Lina Gurung
Guna Raj Nepal
Ranju Kumari Yadav
Gobinda Puri**

A global institution of critical importance, higher education has been in a constant flux in the past few decades. Higher education systems around the world have witnessed significant transformations brought about by the impact of globalization, the explosion in ICT, and increasing enrollments (massification) in higher education, among others. Among the impacts of these impacts are the spreading use of English, cross-cultural experiences and skills, collaboration for research and scholarships across borders, and the expansion of private higher education. The international exchange of ideas, knowledge, and skills also characterize today's higher education, as well as interdisciplinary collaborative research, increasing volumes of publication, and the exponential use of ICT in research practice.

Despite the influences of some of the above changes and dynamics, however, especially in the developing world, unequal opportunities and resources keep higher education an aspiration for the majority, making it seem more like an end than a means toward achieving other goals in the lives of individuals and communities. Higher education in our country Nepal, for instance, exhibits a complex mix of forward leaps alongside persisting challenges that make structural changes very slow or impossible. It also continues to use imported frameworks and aspire for international standards, rather than address national needs and social realities as well. Curricula don't build on local knowledge bases; internationally aligned degree programs such as the four-year college don't meet national needs; and

content-heavy teaching and assessment practices fail to address students' future needs in local society and professions. As technology makes information more accessible and opportunities in the global marketplace more appealing young generations, formal education is becoming less appealing (as well as less affordable) to them.

Nepal doesn't have a very long history of modern higher education, as it established a public college, Tribhuvan University, just six decades ago. After the restoration of democracy in Nepal in 1990, Nepali higher education landscape rapidly expanded and started radically transforming, in response to political upheavals, globalization, and technological advancements. In addition to the government-funded (public) universities which now include regional ones, there are community-funded (community), and privately funded (private) colleges and universities that provide higher education. This tiny country now educates nearly half a million students. However, the one public institution still serves 80 percent of the students across the nation to this day. On the one hand, the public institutions maintain high access but have a low graduation rate, with lower quality of education than private institutions. On the other, all three types, including public and community colleges, mainly concentrate in just a few urban centers. The establishment of Nepal Open University in 2016 (which became functional in 2018) is expected to provide additional access to higher education for the economically disadvantaged students regardless of their geography which is one of the major hurdles. But the public hasn't leaned very heavily in this direction either. Broadly put, the development of higher education in developing countries like Nepal shows the urgent need for it to be reframed within a social justice approach – not just to advance technologically and in terms of quality and rigor but to make it accessible and to redesign it for affecting equity and justice for all.

It is in the above context of entangled opportunities and problems, change and challenges that this Special Issue is situated. The issue includes nine research articles from Nepali scholars who have explored the current status and key issues in Nepali higher education, seeking to offer broader perspectives. The articles have highlighted social disparities in the Nepali society reflected in its higher education, influence and domination of the western knowledge, professional development of teachers and shifting practices in teaching learning due to the recent global pandemic of Covid-19. The socio-economic context of learners in Nepal reveals

the disparities and how higher education has not been able to address them equitably. As Nepal stands at the crossroads of major political transitions, the issue of how higher education can play a transformational role in exploiting its various developmental opportunities is a key priority in the Nepalese context. A country with an immense potential for development due to its abundant natural resources and diverse topography, Nepal needs the synergy and system that can be garnered only by expanding the boundaries of higher education. How can Nepalese higher education contribute to the development of research capacity so that developmental goals could be harnessed fully? How can the discourses surrounding the impact of local-global interactions be tailored to fit the local needs, while realizing the global values of quality education? How can Nepalese higher education open up productive spaces for research collaboration so that international educators can be invited to support strategic planning and institutional leadership to that end? How can it be used to substantiate accountability and autonomy among higher education institutions? Questions such as these demand a major breakthrough in the way knowledge, skills, and scholarships are anchored on higher education in Nepal.

The global pandemic of Covid-19 has disrupted Nepal's overall education and especially higher education in ways that it will take a generation to fully understand and address the impacts. But the crisis has also accelerated some changes, challenging slow-changing institutions and their faculty and students to learn and adapt more quickly. Some of the changes might help address inequities and create new opportunities for more people. Still, it is equally important to be cautious against new kinds of challenges cropping up in the changing landscape – some of which contributors to this have started to identify and address.

There is an inspiring background to this special issue that we want to also share. A grassroots community of scholars from diverse disciplines from Nepal conducted a rigorous academic writing and publication program for the university faculties and researchers in late 2020 and early 2021. The program's mission was to support scholars in a global-south country to enhance their research and publication skills, and it was multidisciplinary and transnational in collaboration and support. Among the roughly 100 scholars who were selected, 81 completed the three-month rigorous workshop with article manuscripts ready for publication. Given that the works focusing on

higher education would be a natural fit, we responded to a call for a special issue and got to work, calling for additional work from interested scholars. Our editorial team is grateful to *JIMPHE* for providing this invaluable space for a Nepal based Special Issue. As elsewhere, there is an increasing demand for research and publication in Nepal but support program for writing, mentoring, and collaboration to promote academic rigor and integrity are just catching up. Therefore, this issue has greatly inspired Nepali scholars by connecting them to global and local academic audiences, as well as providing opportunity and support in the process. This issue has highlighted the importance of locally grounded research, providing us opportunities to practice new skills and learn to use new tools for journal publication workflow.

We hope that readers from around the world find something new and useful in the perspectives and stories, experiences and findings about higher education from both unique and similar contexts of Nepal. And we would like to thank the journal and its editorial team for the opportunity to contribute to this special issue.

Editors' Bios

LINA GURUNG, PhD is a faculty in Kathmandu University School of Education (KUSOED) under the department of Development Education. She completed her PhD thesis on the 'Experiences of online and distance education learners in Nepali Universities from KUSOED'. Her research areas of interest are online and distance education, curriculum assessment, digital pedagogy, gender analysis, mentoring, women and development, women and media, and digital divide.

GUNA RAJ NEPAL is a lecturer of English at Sukuna Multiple Campus, Morang. He has presented papers and given plenaries at the provincial as well as national conferences of Nepal English Language Teachers' Association (NELTA). He is currently pursuing M.Phil. from Kathmandu University, School of English Language Education. His research areas of interest include critical thinking, learners' autonomy, and ecological approaches to English language teaching.

RANJU KUMARI YADAV is a Ph.D. candidate at the Department of Gender Studies in Tribhuvan University, Nepal. She holds a Master's degree in Education and Rural Development from Tribhuvan University. She has a decade-long work experience in local governance, GESI, and community development in Nepal. She has conducted several studies, assessments, and evaluations of development projects. She has substantial experience in quantitative and qualitative research.

GOBINDA PURI is a lecturer of English at Janta Multiple Campus, Sunsari, affiliated to Tribhuvan University, Nepal. He is also an alumnus instructor at United States-English Access Microscholarship Program, Nepal and the Mentor, Action Research Mentoring Scheme (ARMS), British Council, Nepal. He has presented papers at international conferences of NELTA, IATEFL, TESOL and JALT. He also serves as teacher trainer and resource person in the region. His research focus is on teacher education, action research, critical theory, and research in higher education. He is currently pursuing M.Phil. in English education from Nepal Open University.