



A Tale of Two Countries: Comparison of the Tertiary Education Systems of Bhutan and Nepal

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Abstract

This paper examines the issues and opportunities related to the higher education systems of two developing countries, Bhutan and Nepal. After an overview of demographics and geography as well as sociopolitical histories of each nation, a closer comparison and discussion of their respective educational curricula and approaches follows. The question is whether Nepal and Bhutan, which cannot hope to compete individually in the global arenas of education or economics, can nonetheless make higher education work for themselves in sustainable and locally appropriate ways. In the end, Bhutan is more successfully managing this challenge by elevating and integrating key aspects of its unique culture into its educational planning and implementation.

Key words: Nepal, Bhutan, higher education, comparison, culture

Seen from a distance, Nepal and Bhutan are two developing nations that have some interesting and even unique features for comparison. In addition to having limited human and material resources, they are both somewhat remote due to their landlocked and mountainous geography. Their economies are still primarily agricultural, supplemented by tourism. They also share a long history of self-governance (as opposed to colonialism) based on official state religions; the democratization process has been completed quite recently in both cases. As a result, these two countries have faced some similar issues while trying to manage the unavoidable economic, political, and cultural pressures created by globalization and internationalization.

There exist some significant differences between these countries as well. In terms of land mass, Nepal is almost four times the size of Bhutan. Its population is approximately 28 million, compared to Bhutan's roughly 750,000. Another difference is the comparative longevity of their university systems, with Bhutan's being much newer. Lastly, within the past several decades, Nepal has experienced serious political upheavals (not to mention natural disasters), which Bhutan has been spared.

The above factors have all contributed to opportunities and challenges in the present higher educational landscapes in these countries, but of particular interest in this article is the role of culture: how it has shaped their educational systems and how cultural and economic

factors may interact when it comes to higher education development in Bhutan and Nepal. At this point, the Anglo-American form of higher education has been universally adopted in many countries around the world. Given that this Western-based model necessarily brings capitalist, secular, and individualistic values along with a scientific-rationalistic orientation, tension between national norms and the “imported” educational system may result. To what degree have policymakers in Nepal and Bhutan addressed this issue of potential cultural displacement? Will they be able to integrate the old and the new in ways that work for their societies? To date, Bhutan shows more evidence of this type of innovation due to its smaller, more manageable size as well as its well-articulated social policies, based on Gross National Happiness (GNH), which strongly support and even enforce cultural heritage preservation.

Further, global education policy is being increasingly driven by economic considerations, again fueled by concerns and changes in the US and UK systems. Western higher education promises to provide the skills and knowledge that emerging market-based economies like Nepal and Bhutan require. Unfortunately, employability through advanced education doesn’t always equal employment if job opportunities at home don’t exist in sufficient quantity. This gap between expectations and reality may result in social unrest and “brain drain” to more prosperous countries, which Nepal is experiencing to a much greater extent than Bhutan is. Again, cultural identity factors, not just economic necessity, may be contributing to this difference in outcomes.

Overall, my interest lies in whether and how these two countries, which cannot hope to compete individually in the global arenas of education or economics, can nonetheless make higher education work for themselves in sustainable and locally appropriate ways. Specifically, comparing Nepal and Bhutan highlights the potential benefits of skillfully adapting foreign educational modalities to fit local value systems. In the end, it appears that Bhutan is more successfully managing the considerable tensions between Gross National Happiness and Gross National Product by elevating and incorporating key aspects of its unique culture into its educational vision and implementation.

Bhutan profile

The Kingdom of Bhutan has a long history of rule based on kinship ties. The government has always been in the hands of a Buddhist ruling class with origins in Tibet. In fact, the nation is still 75% Buddhist, with Hindus and a very few Muslims making up the remaining population (Chauhan, 2008). Although it remained largely isolated and unaffected by world affairs and modern inventions for many centuries, it began a well-planned and peaceful transition onto the world stage starting in the 1950s, motivated by both geopolitical and economic concerns (Thinley, 2009). This process was initiated and carried out by Bhutan’s monarchy, making it rather unusual. Another unusual element of this transition is the aforementioned state policy of GNH, which has lent cohesion throughout the modernization process by formally asserting that “spiritual and emotional development are equally as important as promotion of material consumption and modern physical comforts...and that the ultimate purpose of the government is to promote the happiness of its people” (Thinley, 2009, p. 3). Implemented in a series of Five-Year Plans starting in 1961, the country became a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary democracy in 2008. It is noteworthy that from the beginning, the education and health sectors have been of the highest budgetary priority. Presently, the development of the entire secular education system is the responsibility of the Ministry of Education.

Monastic schooling was the earliest form of organized education in Bhutan, and it remained the predominant one until the 1950s (Cokl, 2010). In fact, it still exists in parallel with

the state-sponsored secular education system, all the way through college level. Western-style education was introduced through the first school in 1915, and it has expanded and diversified ever since (Thinley, 2009). The country's first and only public university, Royal University of Bhutan, was established in 2003 and currently is comprised of 11 colleges and institutes. They offer diploma and degree programs, although without Research or PhD capacity as of 2009. Free schooling has been the government's policy aim, from primary through tertiary levels, with access to higher education determined by post-secondary exam scores (Cokl, 2010). In fact, about 10% of Bhutanese students who pass the national exam go abroad for college, mostly to India (Thinley, 2009). Chauhan (2008) adds that while English-speaking nations do attract most of these students, "the vast majority...return to their homeland" (p. 40).

Bhutan faces many education-related challenges. In 2010, the literacy rate was reported at around 60%, with a UN Human Development ranking of 132 out of 182 countries with available data (Cokl, 2010). In tertiary education, gender parity has yet to be accomplished. For example, as of 2008, 78% of university instructors were male and 22% female; women comprised only 32% of the student body. Further, there are ongoing concerns about both the overall quality and capacity of the secular higher education system. The government is taking steps to remedy the situation by strengthening its regulatory and information technology systems while encouraging private sector investment, research, and international alliances (Thinley, 2009).

Nepal profile

Nepal is a very diverse country, especially linguistically and ethnically. The 2001 Census reported over a hundred ethnic groups and castes and more than 90 spoken languages, not including dialects. In terms of religion, Hindus comprise the predominant group at 81%, followed by 11% Buddhists, and 8% other religions (UNESCO-IBE, 2011). This reflects the country's former status as an official Hindu state (Chauhan, 2008). The country's political history is one of repeated governmental changeovers and instability, going from absolute monarchy to multi-party rule to violent Maoist insurgency before becoming the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal in 2006. In September 2015, the process of drafting a new federalist democratic constitution was completed and that document was formally promulgated. Nonetheless, the nation is likely to continue to undergo a transition process for some time, which so far has included political impasses and protests over the Constitution. To round out the picture, in 2011, poverty was reported at around 25% and literacy at 66% (Clark, 2013).

In terms of educational history, the first tertiary-level institution in Nepal was Tri-Chandra College, established in 1918. Before that, higher-status families would often send their children to Indian universities. As a result of political reforms in 1951, the Ministry of Education and Sports was formed (and still oversees) all aspects of education. Then, in 1959, the first doctoral degree-granting institution was founded, Tribhuvan University. It accounts for 90% of student enrollment in Nepali higher education today; this is due to the fact that all public colleges are affiliated with this university, so it has grown into a complex system of higher education institutions with a wide range of programs (Chauhan, 2008). In the 1980s, the Nepalese government promoted the idea of a multi-university system, in which each new institution would be unique in character and function. Thus, there are currently six quite distinctive universities, public and private. In addition, independent private colleges now number in the hundreds, putting the total number of campuses in the country at 834 in 2009 (Ministry of Education, 2010). Chauhan (2008) also alludes to rapid and poorly-regulated growth in the private sector, resulting in public discontent with cost and quality.

Nepal's tertiary education system does seem to have serious problems in multiple areas. Recently, the World Bank reported very limited access and equity; poor educational quality and quality assurance mechanisms; low relevance to the needs of the job market; low government spending along with financial unsustainability of most public institutions; and weak overall higher education governance. In response, a \$65 million credit for educational reforms in Nepal was approved, "for improving quality, relevance, and efficiency of higher education and to assist under-privileged students for equitable access" (World Bank, 2015). Not incidentally, Nepalis study abroad in large numbers, over 24,000 in 2010, according to UNESCO (as cited in Clark, 2013). In contrast to Bhutan, most of them do not return (Bhattarai, 2012).

Discussion

When considering the interaction of local and "imported" cultural values through the higher education system, Bhutan has been able to integrate them fairly successfully, given the ever-growing pressures and challenges from the outside world. This integration process starts with the GNH philosophy, grounded in Mahayana Buddhist principles, as it applies to education; these tenets are plainly set out by the government. Thus, the goals of tertiary education include "to awaken the individual and realize his or her potential for the effective creation, dissemination, and application of knowledge and to serve and do good to others" (Thinley, 2009, p. 14). More specific aims include learning about self and society "as a basis for developing compassion and regard for the wellbeing of others and for the greater happiness of all" (ibid.). This is combined with cultural provisions, to "transmit to the new generations the lessons of the accumulated wisdom and experiences of the past for the promotion and enrichment of our culture" (ibid.). (There are additional stated aims of Bhutanese higher education; these represent only two out of six areas.)

These educational objectives are implemented through a blending of Buddhist instructional content and worldview with those of the West. This is most apparent in the national curricula for early childhood, primary, and secondary schools, which incorporate spiritual and values training at all levels; this learning is facilitated not just through books but through community service, structured meditation and guided self-inquiry. One can also note an ecology-based, multidisciplinary approach to learning, interweaving indigenous values and resources throughout, including the ideal of dignity through labor and the opportunities to be found in agricultural occupations (Royal Education Council, 2012). While such curricular guidelines do not exist for secular tertiary education, the foundation is firmly laid in the earlier grades, when students are most impressionable. Interestingly, monastic schools in Bhutan take a similar approach, with a curriculum that now includes English and arithmetic as well as traditional languages and subjects (Cokl, 2010).

As in Bhutan, a key component of Nepal's culture is its rich spiritual heritage. The peaceful coexistence of Hinduism and Buddhism, in fact their mutual enrichment, in Nepal over many centuries provides a rare and inspiring example of interreligious tolerance. These two traditions share common roots and many core values, including compassion and nonviolence, the interconnectedness of all life, and right action in the form of selfless service to others. However, when examining Nepal's educational situation today, no similar evidence was found concerning cultural preservation or explicit transmission of traditional values through formal education, not even a general discussion of these matters in available literature. Nepal's official educational objectives do mention promotion of national and cultural pride, social unity, and inclusiveness, but the language is broad and unconnected to timetables outlining weekly lessons. On a positive

note, instruction is maintained in both Nepali and English from primary school onward, with Sanskrit studies offered at the tertiary level. However, as a whole, the curriculum is clearly modeled on standard Western education and is mostly concerned with operational, as opposed to learning, outcomes in more recent times. (UNESCO-IBE, 2011). It is also interesting that many of Nepal's educational reports are authored by outside agencies whereas Bhutanese documents are produced locally, thus affecting both the focus and the tone of the respective publications. Finally, without an overarching social policy such as Bhutan's spiritually-based GNH in place, cohesive and culturally-informed educational planning and implementation becomes very difficult, if not impossible, especially in a country as diverse and populous as Nepal.

Additionally, Nepal has long suffered from the combined effects of sociopolitical, cultural, and economic tensions that have periodically erupted in violence and fairly massive outflows of its citizens. It is currently experiencing considerable "brain drain," with the Ministry of Youth estimating that 300,000 young Nepalis leave annually to work and study abroad (cited in Bhattarai, 2012). As previously mentioned, the majority do not return. In a 2012 news report, a Ministry of Education undersecretary commented that the state has failed to recognize or utilize its people's talents, an idea echoed by a middle-class teacher who said, "People like me don't get respected here...I'm moving to the US with my family. I'm not obligated to return." Likewise, a Nepali Congress Party member lamented that by age 18, young residents become pessimistic about their future in Nepal, saying, "It's not only in the cities...Even in the villages, people are giving up hope on the country." Although the Ministry of Youth and Sports devised a policy in 2010 to develop young people's skills and create jobs at home, it may be a case of too little, too late. As a 27-year-old doctor put it, "There aren't any good opportunities here. The most important moments of my life are being wasted" (Bhattarai, 2012). Reading the comments of these officials and soon-to-be emigrants, one is struck by the alienated tone, even a sense of being abandoned by the government.

Bhutan also offers very limited economic opportunities at home. It is, in fact, considered to be among the least developed countries in the world, yet it has not experienced nearly this degree of "brain drain." Of course, no direct comparison can be made between the socioeconomic and political situations in these two nations, and certainly no causative relationship can be inferred between GNH and the relatively small percentage of Bhutanese who permanently emigrate. Nonetheless, it seems that social policy planning of this sort could be significantly lessening the impact of the exodus phenomenon in Bhutan. It is, after all, this exact sense of belonging and mutual caring that GNH strives to nurture among its citizens, as well as between the government and the governed. In the words of Tshewang Dendup, a Bhutanese alumnus of UC Berkeley, "Maybe we are somewhat isolated from the world, but we feel part of a living community that is not just connected by wires. That's why 95 percent of us exchange students return home" (Schell, 2002).

To conclude, Bhutan has placed traditional ethics at the center of its educational system while Nepal has followed a more Western model, stressing academic and vocational competencies over moral development, especially at the post-secondary level. In light of its ongoing and various challenges, Nepal could consider shifting its educational focus in a direction similar to that of Bhutan, not to the exclusion of marketplace concerns (or minority religions) but as a way to encourage national unity and pride of place, at the very least. (Unfortunately, there is also no denying that the political and fiscal situation there must improve for higher education to move forward.) Overall, the cases of Nepal and Bhutan help to illustrate the importance of comprehensive and culturally appropriate educational policy. More specifically, in order to

maximize the potential benefits of higher education in emerging economies, the character and traditions of the people, including their wisdom traditions, cannot be ignored. If this sounds a bit idealistic, we might recall the loftiest aspiration of higher education: to work for the greater good by transforming individuals, and thus societies, through the power of words and ideas. We also should not underestimate the potential of committed practitioners (backed up by policymakers, hopefully) to effect such transformative change across and within cultures.

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