

Higher Education in Nepal: Prospects and Challenges in New Millennium

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Preamble

Though education is a late coming prodigy in Nepal, yet it has a glorious history of almost one and a half century. The record shows that formal educational history of Nepal began only after 1853 (1910 BS) with the establishment of Durbar High School – the first ever established formal school in Nepal. Referring to the history, Nepal was a humble abode of rishis and recluses for religious austerity, meditation and devotion in ancient times. Gurukuls or Ashrams were the rendezvous for Gurus and disciples to transfer the knowledge and insight under the Hindu System of informal education and Gumbas or monasteries for similar intent among Buddhists. The main purpose of education at that time was to teach religious philosophy. Even today when we think of education and schooling, we usually think of what we have been knowing as school since then with a few modification only – the typical conventional way it has been till the date. That is how parents, teachers, politicians and many students think of learning as yet in our context. But the new millennium has ushered in with a mind-blowing technological revolution, unforeseen challenges and incredible opportunities. We now live in an increasingly diverse, complex, globalized and media-prop society. Today's kindergarteners will be retiring in the decade of 2060s. Upon observing today's meteoric innovation of technology and resultant lifestyle, we cannot think up any idea of what the world will look like in five years time and much less about fifteen year thence. Yet we are making an effort to prepare our students for that enigmatic world.

Unlike our dais, our descendents have to encounter with many emerging issues such as global warming, green energy, IT revolution, poverty alleviation, social & gender inclusion, hi-tech fever and other environmental as well as societal issues. These issues lead to a need for our students to be able to face, function, thrive and succeed personally, socially, economically and politically on local, national and global levels. Addressing the nation's schoolchildren in Denver (Colorado) on 8 September 2009, the US President Barack Obama said "You'll need the knowledge and problem-solving skills you learn in science and math to cure diseases like cancer and AIDS, and to develop new energy technologies and protect our environment. You'll need the insights and critical thinking skills you gain in history and social studies to fight poverty and homelessness, crime and discrimination, and make our nation more fair and more free. You'll need the creativity and ingenuity you develop in all your classes to build new companies that will create new jobs and boost our economy" (Asia Society, 2009). He might have intended to say that it is the 21st century but our schools are not there and our challenge now is to reinvent schools for this century – for the sake of our children, our society, our nation and the welfare of our world at large.

Thus, our challenge is to make the paradigm shift from conventional pattern of education to global pattern of 21st century education. Even kindergarteners can make a difference in the world by participating in real-life, real-world service learning projects. You're never too young, or too old, to make your voice heard and create change that makes the world a better place. Emerging technologies and ascribing attributes of the globalization also provide unlimited possibilities for exciting new discoveries and developments such as new forms of energy, medical advances, restoration of environmentally wrecked areas, IT leap, and exploration into space and into the depths of the oceans. The possibilities are unlimited.

Making a significant shift of our academic model into the global model is not easy task. Many universities have updated the process and proceeds of higher education and have made their programs accessible in many parts of the world by means of information and computing technology. Distance learning, online education, teleconferencing are some of the examples. Business houses are also taking initiatives to establish their own universities, known as corporate universities, to produce core human resources for their organizations to fit them exactly with the jobs – perhaps due to the gap

between the industry requirements and skills of the graduates. Some organizations have already converted their offices into paperless work stations with the help of intranet, internet and comp-tech configuration. Learning by doing has become the key concept of education today. Montessori concept of teaching is on the rise widely even in Nepalese institutions.

Global Trend in Higher Education

The curriculum of twenty-first century education has certain considerable attributes. It is interdisciplinary, project-based, and research-driven. Classrooms are expanded to include the greater community with international students. Sometimes students collaborate with people of their community or around the world in various projects. The curriculum incorporates higher order thinking skills, multiple intelligence, technology and multimedia, multiple literacies of the 21st century, and authentic assessments. Students are self-directed, and work both independently and interdependently. The curriculum and instructions are designed to motivate students to differentiate their individual tasks and at the same time inculcating them the sense of challenging attitudes in study. The curriculum is not confined within any textbooks, but is more thematic, project-based and integrated. Textbooks are just one of many resources. Skills and content are not taught as an end in themselves, but students learn them through their research and application in their projects. Knowledge is not memorization of facts and figures, but is accrued through researches and applications, and connected to previous knowledge and personal experience. The skills and content become relevant and needed as students require this information to complete their projects. The basic skills are applied within the context of the curriculum, and are not ends in themselves. Assessment moves from regurgitation of memorized facts as well as disconnected processes to demonstration of understanding through application in a variety of contexts. Real-world audiences are an important part of the assessment modus operandi.

Rapid growth of information and computing technology has made higher education free from strict rules and regulations of the government and universities. Institutional innovations and market oriented education through public-private-partnership (3Ps) have become major spirit in higher education in the developed countries with a view to respond to the need of the market and change in the mix of job (Kerr, 1995). American experts believe that the partnership as a consortium of business, technology and academic institutions can lead the national movement to include 21st century skills as the new basics of modern education in the United States. The education pattern in the first world is flexible, creative, challenging, and complex. It addresses a rapidly changing world filled with fantastic new problems as well as exciting new possibilities. Some institutions' core curriculum help students become i-kids whom they in fact presume as future global citizens. In many countries today's students are referred to as "digital natives", and educators as "digital immigrants". Teachers are working with students whose entire lives have been immersed in the 21st century media culture.

Today's kids are digital learners – they literally entertain the world via the filter of computing devices: the cellular phones, handheld gaming devices, PDAs, and laptops they take everywhere, plus the computers, TVs, and games they console at home. A survey by the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation (Asia Society, 2009) found that young people of 8 to 18 years in urban society adhere with electronic media for more than six hours a day in an average. Many are multitasking – listening to music while surfing the Web or instant-messaging friends while playing a video game. In the first world countries, even toddlers utilize multimedia devices and internet with tools such as handheld video games like Leapster and web sites such as www.pbskids.org and www.nick.com. Nowadays, preschoolers (around 3 year-old babies) easily navigate these electronic, multimedia resources on games in which they learn colors, numbers, letters, spelling, and more complex tasks such as mixing basic colors to create new colors, problem-solving activities, and reading. However, as Dr. Michael Wesch (Asia Society, 2009) points out, although today's students understand how to access and utilize these tools, many of them are used for entertainment purposes only, and the students are not really media literate. The need is to teach our students how to use the tools to make them truly media literate as they function in an online collaborative, research-based environment – researching, analyzing, synthesizing, critiquing, evaluating and creating new knowledge.

Evolution of Higher Education in Nepal

Higher education in Nepal does not have a long history. Nevertheless, to understand the progress Nepal has made in terms of education must begin with a brief overview of the country's higher education landscape. The era of higher education in Nepal began in 1918 AD with the establishment of Tri-Chandra College. Students at that time had to follow the curriculum and examinations of Patna University (India) due to the absence of any administering body for university programs in the country. Tribhuvan University (TU) was established only in 1959 (2016 BS) that happens to be the first state-run university in Nepal. Initially, TU depended largely on Patna University for the curriculum models, faculties as well as examinations. But today, it handles 61 constituent and 191 affiliated campuses across the country independently with its own mechanism. As the biggest university of the state, TU offers 1,079 courses at the bachelor's level and over 1,000 courses at the master's level at present (TU, 2010). In 1971 the government made radical changes in the education system of the country by introducing National Education System Plan (NESP) under the fourth five-year development plan (1970-75). The NESP introduced a new national system of public education in the country.

Establishment of Mahendra Sanskrit University in Dang in 1986 paved a new dimension to foster Sanskrit education in Nepal. Gradually the concept of multi-university system emerged in the country to decentralize and develop education in the regional level. As a result, Kathmandu University came into existence in 1991 while Purbanchal University and Pokhara University emerged in 1995 and 1997 respectively to cover the eastern and western regions of Nepal as regional universities. Following the footsteps, Lumbini Boudha University incorporated in 2005. A couple of deemed universities are also in operation. They are National Academy of Medical Sciences (2002) and B.P. Koirala Institute of Health and Sciences (1993). Besides, four other universities – the Agriculture and Forest University at Rampur Chitwan, Open University, Mid-Western University, Far-Western University are also in the pipeline. In this way, the horizon of education has broadened to foster the true spirit of education and to provide a wide range of market-driven programs in the country. Now, there are six universities and two medical institutes granting their own degrees in Nepal.

Challenges of Higher Education in Nepal

Historically, the structures of most academic disciplines were copied from the Indian universities. The pedagogical legacy of India is deeply ingrained across the entire education domain of Nepal as Patna University was the sole institution that provided substantial assistance during the preliminary phases of education in Nepal – be it for designing the curriculum models or granting of board examinations. Till the date, the teaching methodology across all disciplines in Nepalese colleges/campuses is very formal and lecture oriented. Students sit in large lecture halls, dutifully transcribing lecture notes delivered by the faculty. There is almost no interaction between faculty and student. Teaching-learning here in Nepal is inherently a one way operation. This is also true in some disciplines such as management, science and engineering which basically necessitate a huge practical inject in learning over theoretical premise. This pedagogical pattern is not only prevalent in bachelors' level but equally adopted in masters programs as well. Emphasis is given to a detailed, theoretical understanding of each theme and discipline thereby ignoring the practicable applicability in the real world situation. In turn, examination pattern is also designed in such a way that it requires students to repeat verbatim large blocks of theory. For this reason, rote memorization and regurgitation becomes the primary means for successfully passing the exams. The consequence of this is enormous for Nepal. It has meant, generally, that there is a mismatch between the market needs and the university graduates, and this has been a longstanding imbalance. Agrawal (1974), a Professor of Management at T.U, acknowledges this point pointing out that "the present curriculum does not prepare students for lifelong careers, nor does it provide them with an understanding and appreciation of the challenges and problems faced by the developing nation. Consequently, Commerce graduates desperately look for a clerical job in the bureaucracy; and, if successful they wait in the hope of getting one. In the meantime, they swell the ranks of the educated unemployed". As advocated by Agrawal, the syllabi of university program along with the assessment pattern in Nepal are major causes to produce incompatible manpower fit only for unemployment pool. Besides, weak interface between job market and academia, decade-old curriculum and outdated textbooks are other main stumbling blocks in imparting quality education in Nepalese academic institutions. Other challenging issues associated with the education domain of Nepal are inadequate infrastructure, shortages of teaching materials based on local realities, absence of down-to-earth research

practices in study, brain drain of qualified and competent faculty, and lack of student-centered teaching pedagogy to name a few.

Conclusions

Moving along with the new millennium, Nepal has experienced some substantial transformation in some vital areas. Some attributes of this decade are fast growth in media, quantum leap in information technology, rapid rise of financial sector and vast use of computers in every sphere of life. Likewise, proliferation of NGOs/INGOs, growing thrust on privatization and economic liberalization, integration with global economy and entry into the WTO, unstable political regime and weak governance are some other perceptible highlights of this decade. On the other hand, fierce competition and viable efficiency are becoming major considerations of business enterprises to survive, sustain and prosper. In upcoming days, Nepalese business horizon seems to be highly dominated by multinational companies (MNCs) and joint ventures ensuing entrepreneurship more pronounced than ever before. The MNCs and joint venture enterprises will create some job opportunities especially at lower and middle level management. The latest trend seems that management team will gradually replace the existing tradition of individual Chief Executive Officer. Decision making process will bound to be short and fast due to increasing use of faster and more efficient information handling and communication system. This may lead to flatter organization chart with more staff at the middle level.

An intense pressure to hone the competitive edge will substantially increase in Nepal with its entry into the WTO. The need to develop infrastructure and alleviate poverty will lead further expansion of development sector, leading to increasing demand for managers able to implement program effectively and efficiently to reach the target group. Service sector seems to be expanding rapidly in the future. Multinational and global businesses will come up to dominate the Nepalese business vibes. The social structure and societal values are undergoing a change and the pace of change will be faster in the days to come. With this transformation and rolled up changes in borderless concept of 5Ms (money, machine, manpower, material and mechanism – capital, products, knowledge and manpower) as well as the pattern of profession, the traditional “chalk & talk” way of learning needs to be modified to a wide variety of learning styles and modes. Our traditional Gurukuls need to be transformed into the learning and research centers in the light that good education is a carefully contrived and delivered learning experience that changes the student, improving their ability to function within the discipline they study.

As a partner in the global trading system, Nepalese businesses will have global opportunities for exports, but they also will face mounting pressures to compete and protect their niche within the country. Sound strategic management coupled with a global vision and a sound grounding in financial and operational decision making will become more important than ever. This, in turn, requires result-oriented managers who can ‘act globally and think locally’ in assessing the impact and implication of the business in the community they operate just in reverse the traditional saying “think globally and act locally”. The need for effective and efficient professional managers in all sectors of the Nepali economy is now greater than ever. So the real challenge lies in the academic competence. Our institutions thriving in Gurukulian approach appear to be completely fiasco in imparting education for this new millennium. A radical transformation in infrastructure and teaching pedagogy is the pressing need of the hour. The Government spending on publication education at present is just 16.24% (budget speech 2066) with the share of 13% on tertiary education, 24.3% on secondary education and 62.7% on primary education (World Bank 2009). The volume of spending on education seems to be futile if we target our graduates to be compatible with the global milieu.

The big challenge of the new millennium lies in the task of transforming our colleges into student-centric research centers availed with ample resources supported by hi-tech gears unlike the traditional ‘chalk and talk’ lecture-notes transcribing one way venues. It is inevitable to avoid the mismatch between the job and the skills gained by our graduates. A vital shift is necessary in education to produce job creators (entrepreneurs) rather than job seekers (employees). A college needs to be refurbished as a consortium of business, community, technology and educational institution to maximize the market-manpower interface alike in the first world nations along with a state campaign to include new millennium skills as the new basics of modern education in the new global prospect since the insights and expertise gained by our students in

social sciences should help to fight poverty, inequality, crime and discrimination where as our science graduates need the knowledge and dexterity to control epidemics, develop new source of energy, innovate technology and protect environment. Similarly, management graduates should be entrepreneurial with vision and ingenuity to build new companies that will create new employments and boost up the national economy.

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