

Nepal's Higher Education: Public vs. Private?

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As one of the poorest countries in the world, Nepal (with 30 million people) is going through a series of transitions and is rewriting its constitution. Access to education and now to higher education is limited in Nepal.

The rapidly changing political climate in Nepal may lead to further development of higher education in the recently declared republic, which replaced the centuries-old monarchy. The record of higher education development in Nepal is short but has been growing since the establishment of democracy only in the 1950s. The Tribhuvan University established in 1959 was the oldest and the only university (until 1992), initiated with the help of India and the United States. Prior to the establishment of the Tribhuvan University, some classes were conducted in Kathmandu, the capital city, under the prescribed courses of Patna University (state of Bihar, India). It conducted its own examinations and conferred degrees to successful students. By 1965, in Nepal there were 5 colleges with total enrollment of 5,000 and 51 community colleges with a total enrollment of 10,000.

DEVELOPMENT OF NEW UNIVERSITIES

Only in 1992, the Kathmandu University was established under an act of parliament using public, private partnership modalities. The establishment of that university paved the way for expansion of private-sector involvement in higher education in the country. To date there are only five universities serving the 30 million population of Nepal: the Tribhuvan University, Nepal Sanskrit University (established in the 1980s as part of a Royal Commission on Higher Education), Kathmandu University (in 1992), Purbanchal University in the eastern region (in 1994), and the Pokhara University in the western region (in 1997). These institutions were developed as regional universities in the mid-1990s as per the recommendations of the 1992 National Education Commission. The establishment of two more regional universities are under pipeline. Lumbini University has just been initiated; and two autonomous medical institutions—BP Koirala Institute of Health Sciences and National Academy of Medical Sciences—are doing particularly well.

ACCESS: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Enrollment increased in higher education from 17,000 in 1971 to 103,290 in 2001 and then to about 254,856 by 2005/06. Data on the enrollment of students at the constituent campuses of Tribhuvan University for 2005/06 indicate 153,116 students were enrolled. These numbers suggest a massive demand (market) for the higher education. However, both access to and quality of higher education, qualified human resources, and research capabilities have become core issues. Politicization of higher education, 10 years of internal conflict (1996–2006), and

weak governance mechanisms further damaged the higher education sector, despite the support from international donor bilateral agencies.

The experience of six decades of higher education in Nepal is not promising. The country is among the least developed countries (though bigger than Malaysia and Australia in terms of the population of 30 million), but contributes to internationalization of higher education. There are more than 200 education consultancies currently in Kathmandu Valley, working hard with Nepalese students who could afford to pay fees to universities, to send them abroad every year. Nepal also attracted Indian investment for establishing institutions that offer medical education. The aim is to attract rich Indian and foreign students who can pay huge sums as fees and donations, for their medical education in Nepal. For example, the Manipal Education and Medical Group—a private education group from India—has set up a medical and dental college in Nepal. The majority of international students studying in Indian universities are also from Nepal—due to affordability, quality, reputation, geographical proximity, and also the scholarships offered by the Indian government.

PRIVATIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Private higher education in Nepal has grown in size over the last two decades and surpassed public higher education. To cite an example: Kathmandu University, a private university, receives large financial support from the government. The per student University Grants Commission grant for Kathmandu University is more than the per capita grant given to the public colleges, affiliated with Tribhuvan University. Thus, while public institutions cater to poor students, private institutions serve the middle and rich classes.

Legacies of prejudice, marginalization, social exclusion, and denial are still enmeshed in Nepal's social composition, despite the increased levels of access to higher education. Hence, the crux of the nation's problems is how to enhance access to quality and affordable higher education for all citizens, without discrimination on the basis of class, creed, caste, geography, and religion.

THE WAY FORWARD

Policymakers need to debate on how Nepal can benefit and contribute to global initiatives—such as, UNESCO's World Declaration on Higher Education for the 21st Century, which provides an international framework at systems and institutional levels. How can politicians, policymakers, university bureaucrats, market forces, and learners themselves understand and practice the real significance of higher education, which can forge closer links to societal needs and the world of work?

In 2008, Nepal had been declared a federal republic. Currently, the constitution is being rewritten, and Nepalese are hoping for peace, prosperity, equality, and justice. This process is another chance for Nepal to carve its policy to promote of higher education. So far, this policy on higher education seems only looking at universities as laboratories to breed students into “party politics” and use them to meet the ambitions and self-interests of political parties and their leaders. If this continues, unfortunately the Republic of Nepal will be no different than the past regimes, in which access to higher education has been determined by the class and affinity to the rulers.

In addition, there is an urgent need to resolve the political, ecological, sociological, and intellectual requirements of Nepalese society, and it is going

through a series of transformations and restructuring. Nepali academics should play a vital role and lobby for constitutional rights that determine the forms of knowledge to be cultivated in public and private higher education institutions. This is an immediate responsibility of the academic community and cannot be left to the vagaries of Nepalese politicians, who see higher education as “expensive” for the government and hence families need to invest and students should “buy.” With its rich history and natural resources, Nepal faces an opportunity to exploit and to transform the country into a world-class learning center. It is not the lack of resources but the lack of governance to use these resources for the development of higher education. These are the immediate concerns that Nepal must address, in order to stay relevant in the rapidly changing Nepalese society, in particular, and worldwide.