

# Higher education in Nepal: Several challenges ahead

DIASPORA - DECEMBER 2010, Year 3, Issue 1

by Padam Simkhada and Edwin van Teijlingen

## Historical background

The history of higher education (HE) in Nepal is not long but it has achieved significant expansion in a short period. It started with the establishment of Trichandra College in 1918 during the Rana regime, which was the beginning of modern higher education in Nepal. After the advent of democracy in 1951, a number of new colleges (public as well as community) were opened. Tribhuvan University became the first Nepalese university of Nepal in 1959. It took 27 years before the second university Nepal Sanskrit University (NSU) was established in 1986. In rapid succession Kathmandu University (KU) was established in 1991, Purbanchal University (PU) in 1994, and Pokhara University (POU) 1997; and Lumbini Buddha University was established in Lumbini in 2005. There are two academies, B.P. Koirala Institute of Health Science (BPKIHS) at Dharan and the National Academy of Medical Science at Bir Hospital in Kathmandu, which have been functioning like universities. Higher education in Nepal has been growing exponentially as we now have over 600 colleges affiliated within these six universities, and nearly 300,000 students are currently studying in those colleges.

Rapid growth in the higher education sector is, of course, not without its challenges. This article is based on the experiences of two authors who are both based at UK universities and who have been working closely with Nepalese universities and colleges. Both of us are actively involved in supervising a number of Nepalese postgraduate students in the UK. We want to highlight the key challenges for improving the higher education system in Nepal and suggest possible ways forward.

## Key challenges:

Higher education is one of the most significant pillars of global competitiveness index (GCI) to explain a country's share of world markets for its products. However,

Nepal was ranked 10th from the bottom (at 130 in the 139-country list) in the GCI 2010-11. This is not surprising for many to find Nepal low down this list as it is also one of the poorest countries of the world, for example in 2008 it ranked 195 out of 210 countries according to the World Bank. One of the major contributing factors to the poor GCI outcome was Nepal's pitiable higher education.

There are several challenges to higher education which can be looked at both micro and macro level. Some of the issues need to be dealt at national level and a few problems can be solved at university level. Some of those challenges are highlighted here.

**Access and equity:** Although there is rapid growth in the number of available places in higher education, access is still very limited. According to Global Education Digest (GED) of 2007 only about 6% of the population enter higher education in Nepal, this percentage is nearly double in India (11%) and way behind South Korea with 91%. The proportion of Nepalese entering higher education is also seriously below the South Asian (11%) and world average (24%). One key explanation for the generally low participation rate is that poor people, who make up a large proportion of the general population are far less likely to go to higher education. For example, the bottom two quintiles' share in higher education is less than 2%. What we have seen over the past decade or so is that higher education enrolment is expanding primarily in the private sector. This is likely to restrict even more the access to higher education for the poorest part of the population.

Nepal's education system is part of its century's old autocratic and feudalistic political legacy as such has contributed with the country's socio-economic inequalities. Specifically, higher education was male dominated and elitist; almost half of public spending on education used

to absorb by the richest 20% of the population and very little was spent on the poorest 20%. Most vocational courses such as engineering and medicine, which lead to high status and generally well-paid jobs, are generally affordable only to the rich and upper middle classes.

#### *Teaching and learning culture:*

Higher education teaching and learning have been based on memorising lessons and rote learning; an approach borrowed from 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain and India. These conventional teaching methods has focussed more on theoretical principles and abstract concepts, rather than on practical applications and learning skills useful in real life. One of the problems is that both college teachers and students have come to expect this approach to higher education. Consequently, many see teaching is the easiest job available in the market. Higher education teaching should be about challenging our ideas and actions, it should be stimulating students to think for themselves. Unfortunately, even students oppose those teachers who want to teach them using this more challenging approach, as students seem to prefer textbook teaching.

The challenge for Nepal is change the way of thinking and teaching of it educationalists. This is an attitude change which will not be that easy to implement. It would require setting quality standards and performance criteria of higher education institutions, as well as for its teachers and student performance. Moreover, mechanisms for the implementation of standards and criteria must be established, and these need to be accompanied by quality assurance. Worldwide quality assurance in higher education is largely based on self-regulation, peer review and a system of internal and external examiners. There are a high number of Nepalese graduates who have been trained at universities abroad, these graduates do not just bring the most up-to-date knowledge and new skills, they also bring an experience on how teaching can be done differently.

Few would disagree that the examination system of Nepalese universities should be improved. The central system of examinations especially at TU should be decentralised in the process of reform towards an examine system that is more about 'critical thinking' and less about 'knowing facts'.

#### *Politics and academia:*

Across the globe governments find it hard not to interfere in the running of universities. Universities with their critical thinkers are often critical of government policy and its effect on the population. In Nepal the political meddling in the country's higher education system

seem worse than some other countries. The current system of faculty appointments in Nepal has created numerous hurdles in improving the quality of its staff. Both chancellors and vice chancellors being political appointees, the universities have been highly politicised. In many occasions, the universities tend to make academic and administrative decisions under political pressure, not on the basis of academic and/or educational merit, thus adversely affecting the quality of education.

Almost every political party of Nepal has a student wing as its sister organisation and these organisations often seriously disrupt teaching schedules by calling strikes and forcing universities to shut down for political reasons. There is nothing wrong with university students and staff taking an active interest in the running of their institution, on the contrary. What is so limiting in Nepal is that every general political protest and strike seem to be replicated in the universities through student unions and teachers' associations, affecting universities frequently and often badly. One example of the external action in society affecting universities is when there is a change in government university authorities are also changed, sometimes destabilising the university. Experiences from other countries suggests that universities operate best when free from external politics.

Faculty appointments have long been recognised as a problem particularly at TU. Priorities are given to political affiliation rather than academic competence in hiring. Party affiliation is the main qualification to seek appointment at the university. Policy development for higher education should be depoliticised. We must focus on our academic objectives, maintaining high quality standards and protect academic freedom in higher education. The political parties should reach an agreement to depoliticise higher education.

#### *Finance:*

The investment in higher education in Nepal is one of the lowest in the entire world. Nepal's investment in higher education is only 0.4% of the GDP and government spending in higher education is low – about 7% of all public expenditure in education in 2009-10. The main university, for example, TU does not have any additional budget to improve its infrastructure or conduct high quality research. TU spends 90% of its budget on salaries, this is not sustainable in the long run, in fact apart from a few public academic institutions are not sustainable financially.

#### *Relevance for society & industry:*

If higher education is fuel the engine of

modernisation in Nepal the courses on offer need to fit in with the needs of industry. We find that collaboration between employers and academic institutions is weak in Nepal. With the exception of a few premiere institutions the relevance of higher education to the job market needs is poor. Universities and colleges need to change their curriculum to ensure the next generation of highly skilled workers needed in the private and public sector tomorrow is trained today. There needs to be a dialogue between higher education and employers about the perceived needs of skills in tomorrow's workforce. In many institutions the curriculum is old and even obsolete. This is a pity as several programmes appear to have mechanisms for reviewing their curricula and updating it accordingly.

#### *Information access and research skills*

We have already mentioned the phenomenon of textbook teaching. In UK universities the use of textbooks is often limited to first and second year undergraduate teaching and even then students are encouraged to find the latest research-based article in the field. Since subscription fees are high and license agreements complicated universities in Nepal are often unable to subscribe to the global research journals. Therefore, many university staff students in Nepal often have little or no access to the most up-to-date published research literature. This also reduces the country's ability to absorb new scientific and technical ideas. More generally research in Nepal suffers from (a) weak institutional infrastructures; (b) poor funding; (c) low scientific output levels; and (d) being fairly isolated. These factors combined means that staff often lack access to a wider research community with whom ideas can be tested and exchanged, and that Nepal has a poor contribution to the world's knowledge pool.

The recent explosion of electronic scientific publishing on the Internet provides a great opportunity to improve access to research information in developing countries, not just Nepal. Moreover the World Health Organization has been negotiating with leading academic publishers to make scientific journals available to academics and students in developing countries. Consequently, academics in Nepal now can have better access to more and more up-to-date peer-reviewed research literature than ever before. Thousands of peer-reviewed international scientific journals can be accessed online. Moreover, specialist databases, indexes, and reference books are now available in several languages. Full-text articles can be downloaded for saving, printing or reading on screen. Many articles are available online before they are published in print.

Many higher education institutions and their researchers including university teachers are not able to access those freely available research literatures. We both experienced that Nepalese postgraduate students studying in the UK lack the necessary knowledge and skills to access research literature, despite having a strong academic background.

Accessing the available research information is very essential for institutions to bridge the research information gap. Therefore, there is need to improve the access to research information in higher education in Nepal.

#### *Quality and governance:*

While several previous governments pledged to increase spending on education and bring in structural reforms, this has rarely been delivered in practice. Ensuring the quality of higher education is another challenge in Nepal. Generally the quality of higher education is lacking, often quality assurance and the accreditation system is not in place, although the situation is perhaps slightly better in professional education (e.g. engineering and medicine). Although Nepal has initiated the process of decentralisation as a means of improving governance, overall the governance of public higher education is still weak.

Universities in other countries provide training, orientation and research opportunities to teachers to update their knowledge. Unfortunately, university teachers in Nepal hardly get such opportunities and, therefore they stick with very traditional methods of teaching. We argue that Nepal should change the context in which they are trained, updated and teachers should be encouraged to introduce new teaching methods in the classroom. This change should be tied to a modern and rigorous system of appointments based solely on expertise, qualifications and skills.

Faculty also constitutes a very important part of the higher education. There must be adequate number of well qualified faculty to teach the students. There are some university teachers who are highly motivated and well trained, we should harness their enthusiasm and reward their motivation to improve higher education. Faculty at Nepalese university have occasionally demonstrated their ability to perform world class research. But these are individual efforts rather than the result of a system that is well established, adequately resourced and functioning effectively.

#### *The way forward*

If Nepalese universities want to meet an

international standard, it must review and upgrade its higher education system. We realise it will be hard work to get everybody to accept and adopt such drastic paradigm shift.

We need to be careful not to lose the good things from the existing higher education system in Nepal.

We both experienced that Nepalese students attending our UK universities are extremely keen to learn, generally hard-working and appreciative of their academic teachers.

Whilst we are keen to advocate many changes as outlined in this article, we would not want to lose this 'thirst' for knowledge and willingness to work hard towards achieving academic excellence. While revamping Nepal's higher education system, attention should be given to address the diversity of the population (e.g. socio-economic status, rural/urban, ethnicity, gender) and the country's geography. It is unclear what will happen in the future, but it is clear to us that the country needs a clear-cut education policy to meet the challenges of the 21st century. It is difficult to change the higher education without improving TUs situation first as it provides higher education to more than 90 percent of higher education students in the country.

Improving the standards of education in Nepal will be a critical test for the current policy makers. It will

need to resolve concerns over the content of the curriculum, as well as tackling the underlying challenges to higher education and more generally the challenges in society.

#### **About authors:**

Dr. Padam Simkhada

Dr Simkhada is Senior Lecturer (Associate Professor) in International Health at the University of Sheffield, UK. He is Visiting Fellow of Bournemouth University, England and Visiting Lecturer at the University of Aberdeen Scotland, UK.

You can reach to Dr Simkhada on:

[p.simkhada@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:p.simkhada@sheffield.ac.uk)

Dr. Edwin van Teijlingen

Dr Teijlingen is professor of Maternal & Perinatal Health at the Bournemouth University, England and Visiting Professor at Aberdeen University, Scotland UK.

You can reach to Dr Teijlingen on:

[vanteijlingen@bournemouth.ac.uk](mailto:vanteijlingen@bournemouth.ac.uk)

Both authors are Visiting Professor at Monamohan Institute of Health Science affiliated to Purbanchal University, Nepal. Both authors have published over 50 articles related to health science research in Nepal.