

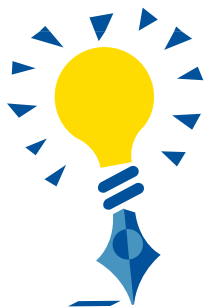
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## Education Reform in Bhutan: Meeting the Youth Employment Challenge

Kinley Rinchen

### Article at a glance

- Bhutan's current education system does not meet the needs of students and employers, only contributing to growing youth unemployment.
- Most Bhutanese students tend to see education as a way to obtain jobs in the public sector, which cannot accommodate them all.
- School curricula should emphasize more skills-based training as well as critical thinking, creativity, innovation, communication, and leadership skills sought after by private sector employers.



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## Introduction

Over the past 45 years, Bhutan has transformed from a relatively unknown hermit-like kingdom into a fledgling democracy. A small country wedged between two giants, China and India, Bhutan maintained isolationist policies for many years to protect its sovereignty and culture. Since the 1960s, however, the country has progressed in terms of economic and political development. This year marked both a celebration of 100 years of the monarchy as well as Bhutan's transition to a parliamentary democracy. In 2006, King Jigme Singye Wangchuck abdicated the throne in favor of his son, and in March 2008, Bhutan held its first democratic national elections and introduced a new constitution.

Since Bhutan's opening up and its initiation of a concrete government strategy for socio-economic development, there have been rapid changes in quality of life. Notably, there is greater emphasis on the value of education, leading to an increased need for adequate educational opportunities at all levels.

Youth now require more and better facilities, as well as knowledge and skills to match employers' needs. In today's world, where employers seek graduates who are able to think creatively, show leadership potential, and use the latest technology, Bhutan's educational system does not prepare its students sufficiently. As unemployment becomes a pressing problem, the educational system, from teaching methods to curricula to facilities, requires major reforms to meet the needs of the country and its youth.

## Insufficient Education Reforms in Bhutan

Popular views on the value of education have changed a great deal over the past 45 years. In the early 1960s, the government began to rigorously promote modern education for its people, including universal public schooling and introducing the English language to the curriculum. During this transition period, the government picked up children from each household to place them in schools. Parents were not supportive of this new policy; as the majority of Bhutanese live

in rural areas, parents relied on children to help with farming and housework. Some parents even begged and bribed local authorities to excuse their children from schools in order to keep them on the farm. Parents simply did not see the value of their children's education – and this mentality had to change.

When the education reform program began, the country had approximately 2,500 students in primary schools. Higher education was not offered in the country and the number of degree-level graduates was negligible. Since then, the government's policy has been successful and the Bhutanese people realized the importance of modern education. This change led to a sharp rise in school enrollment rates and a 30 percent rise in literacy.

Today, enrollment increases 4.2 percent per year, creating the need to expand Bhutan's school system to accommodate 2,300 additional students each year. This growth leads to a continuous increase in the number of students completing the 10th grade. However, there are only 21 higher secondary schools (grades 11 and 12) in the country, so only about 4,200 students can be admitted to grade 11 out of the 6,800 students successfully finishing grade 10. The remaining 2,500 either repeat the 10th grade or resort to searching for jobs.

If a student is lucky enough to acquire a spot in the 11th grade, difficulties are not over. There is only one university in Bhutan, with 10 member colleges. These institutions can accommodate only 1,300 students out of the 4,000 who finish grade 12. An estimated 1,000 students pursue higher education outside the country at their own expense. The remaining students must either look for jobs or repeat the same class. The opportunities for Bhutanese students to earn a higher degree are simply insufficient, which has a detrimental effect on the development of the country.

## Unemployment scenario

In 2007 alone, approximately 8,000 students with a secondary level of education exited the educational system and entered the labor market. Including the 6,300 dropouts from the lower grades, Bhutan has

about 14,300 youths looking for jobs (outside of the agricultural sector) just this year – a huge number in a country with a population of only 672,425.

Unfortunately, these job seekers are qualified for only basic secretarial jobs or other administrative positions based on their limited skills and knowledge. Therefore, the public and private sectors are not able to accommodate more than 20 percent of them. Limited professional opportunities for young people contribute to a very high unemployment rate, among other factors summarized below.

### *1: Inadequate quality of education*

Quality has become the new education buzzword in Bhutanese society. The government and citizens now realize that current graduates do not fulfill the needs and expectations of the private sector. Teaching methods do not assist students to develop basic competencies in critical thinking, creativity, innovation, communication, and leadership. Consequently, new graduates are not qualified to become the workforce needed by the Bhutanese labor market.

### *2: Limited diversity of educational tracks*

Bhutan's education system has not been able to produce students with sufficient technical and scientific knowledge and skills. Many students do not perform well in science and math, which is a prerequisite to many programs of higher education in the country. For instance 4,000 students applied for 1,300 available slots in Bhutan's university. Yet, diploma-level programs such as mechanical engineering, electrical engineering, and nursing could not enroll enough qualified candidates because applicants lacked the necessary science and math backgrounds. Most of the applicants had taken up studies in humanities or business, which have comparatively fewer available positions in the Bhutanese job market.

### *3: Mismatch between demand and supply in the job market*

Among the entrants into the job market, most of the skill-based graduates, such as teachers, engineers,

physicians, and nurses, obtain employment without a problem. This is due to the fact that the country currently lacks qualified personnel in such areas. For instance, in health services, Bhutan needs an additional 900 nurses, a few hundred doctors, and many more technicians. Annually, Bhutan's education system is only able to produce about 50 nurses, three indigenous physicians, and 30-40 technicians. Another high-demand sector is the booming construction industry, which has given rise to the need for skilled labor.

As the overall supply of skilled graduates remains limited, the job market is now saturated with students bearing qualifications only up to grade twelve, who comprise about 70 percent of all job seekers. Not surprisingly, they fail to meet the requirements of various employers who need more specialized labor. Thus, on the one hand, there are many job seekers unable to find employment, and on the other hand, employers are unable to hire enough skilled and knowledgeable new employees.

### *4: Preference for civil service jobs*

One of the main causes of unemployment in Bhutan is the aspirations of graduates to obtain civil service jobs. The majority of young people in Bhutan do not consider entrepreneurship or private sector jobs as career options, instead preferring to wait for the opportunity to gain entry into the public sector, even if that means being unemployed in the meantime. Yet the realistic prospects of public sector employment for most, remain grim. Currently, the civil service comprises 15,000 employees; however, with the government's goal of maintaining a small and efficient civil service, the possibility of expansion is slim.

### *5: Reluctance to enter the private sector*

The government has started to rely heavily on the private sector to drive socio-economic growth, but the private sector is currently not in a position to respond to high expectations for job creation. The private sector is also unable to provide employees with similar opportunities, incentives, and benefits similar to those offered to civil servants. Another reason for this negative image of private sector employment is the

issue of job security. Bhutan's youth worry that private employers hire and fire employees unpredictably. The image of the private sector is also tarnished by employers who promise employees attractive payment packages but do not always pay them as promised. Therefore, the attrition rate in the private sector is very high compared to the civil service.

### *6: Negative attitude towards blue collar jobs*

Young people tend to desire white collar jobs. Youth in Bhutan are of the view that blue collar jobs are meant for those who are not educated or for those who are illiterate; taking up a blue collar job would convey an image of backwardness, socially and economically. Not surprisingly, graduates feel that they deserve better opportunities since they have acquired some educational qualifications. As a result, even though Bhutan's unemployment situation among young people is grave, reluctance to take up manual work has forced the country to seek workers abroad. In 2006, there were 37,063 foreign workers with work permits and about 80,000 employed as day laborers in border towns (*Kuensel*, May 19, 2006). To combat this stigma and develop a skilled labor pool, various vocational institutions were established by the Royal Government. Unfortunately, job seekers still refuse to take up training opportunities in these institutions.

### *7: Lack of entrepreneurship among the youth*

The government has initiated a new program, the Small Business Resource Center (SBRC), to build the nascent private sector and reduce unemployment. Guaranteed by the Royal Government and banks, the SBRC aims to encourage and create self-employment opportunities, particularly among those who have acquired skills through vocational programs. The project enables those who have no assets to offer as collateral to obtain loans, which can be used to start SMEs. Entrepreneurship is not common in Bhutan, and youth do not have the business skills to run a company, or are unwilling to accept the risk of self-employment, so the response of youth to SBRC has not been promising: young people still choose to work for established firms or in the public sector.

## **Addressing the Employment Challenge**

The current trend in numbers of youth exiting the education system shows that within the next five years the country will have about 70,000 young people looking for jobs. The following paragraph illustrates a difficult scenario of severe youth unemployment, highlighting the challenges that lie ahead for the education system in Bhutan.

“The recent growth of the construction industry and the revival of tourism in Bhutan have increased its GDP by 8.7 percent. But data is ‘infected’ by the virus of rising unemployment, especially among youth, who drop out of school between the ages of 15 and 19. Such a bleak scenario is due to the fact that the construction industry invests mostly in engaging skilled laborers... Devendra Subba, an Indian engineer working in Bhutan, said: ‘There is a great dearth of skilled laborers in Bhutan and we meet their requirement from India....’ Subba said the Bhutanese education system was incapable of creating a skilled workforce and the government needed to introduce education reforms, ‘otherwise we will depend on foreign nations not only for funds but also for qualified personnel’... Subba continued to say that this situation, together with the increasing foreign debt, could create serious social tensions.” (Dubey)

Despite the fast rate of economic growth, Bhutan faces challenges in almost every aspect of its development and each is aggravated by the brewing youth unemployment crisis. At the national level, the government needs to encourage and enhance privatization, improve infrastructure, and increase access to finance in order to stimulate job growth. This would also involve establishing a number of training institutions – including new job training centers – to build capacity of youth to become the key workforce for the country. Otherwise, Bhutan's youth unemployment will continue to rise and the private sector will have to resort to importing even more skilled labor from abroad.

Since Bhutan is a developing country, there is a great reliance on external grants and loans to meet domestic needs; however, the most urgent education reforms can at least be initiated without large financial outlays.

## Reform Recommendations

Bhutan needs to focus on the following reforms of its education system, in order to meet the youth employment challenge.

### 1: Educational system reform

The seminal document, published by the Planning Commission of the Royal Government, *Bhutan 2020: A Vision for Peace, Prosperity and Happiness*, states that “Education must prepare young people for the world of work and instill an acceptance in the dignity of labor.” This vision can only be achieved if the responsiveness of education to labor market needs is enhanced.

It is clear that employment opportunities increase with improvement in the quality of education. Accordingly, there is a call for increased student achievement through providing better and more rigorous learning opportunities for students to meet labor market needs. Unlike a decade or two ago, when Bhutan’s society required just reading and writing skills, students must now display an aptitude for creativity, innovation, group dynamism, and leadership to enable them to fit into a knowledge-based society.

The following reforms need to be undertaken in order to equip Bhutan’s youth with skills and knowledge required to succeed in a competitive labor market:

- Identify areas of employers’ demand and provide appropriate counseling to students in schools. This process would provide information to students and parents, informing them about various career opportunities and highlighting necessary skills.
- Provide students with exposure to various subjects and activities so that they can recognize their own potential for advanced training at a later time.

- Improve infrastructure and facilities in the schools, especially IT facilities, to encourage development of students’ communication and technical skills.

### 2: Changing attitudes toward manual labor

There is also a dire need to change students’ attitudes towards manual and skilled labor. It is crucial for students to realize that vocational education is valuable when seeking jobs. Therefore, some kind of technical and vocational education should be experienced by students from an early age. Steps must be taken to weave the elements of applied and practical skill-based education into the curriculum.

Ironically, Bhutanese villages are beginning to experience the shortage of manpower in the agricultural sector as unemployed youth loiter on urban streets. To address this dichotomy, various curricula are being developed to impart a sense of pride and dignity regarding farming. Greater efforts should also be made to implement reforms in the agricultural sector so that farmers can work more efficiently employing improved methods and technology. This approach can bring a sense of pride, joy, and motivation among young farmers, making agriculture an attractive option for employment.

### 3: Curriculum reform

The *Bhutan 2020* report identifies inadequate school curricula as a key factor to low interest in vocational careers among Bhutanese students:

“Problems are compounded by schools curricula and perceptions of job prospects. Despite the enormous efforts made to ‘Bhutanize’ imported curricula, much still needs to be done to adapt teaching programs to the longer-term needs of the nation, especially through the strengthening of components that inculcate a work ethic and respect for the dignity of labour. More of our young people must be encouraged to pursue technical and vocational occupations that can only be found in the private sector ... These negative perceptions find concrete expression in the under-utilization of capacity in technical and vocational

training institutions that the nation can ill-afford. They also constitute a major obstacle to the growth of the private sector.” (*Bhutan 2020: A Vision for Peace, Prosperity and Happiness*).

Implementing the following curriculum reforms would allow students to succeed in today’s competitive labor market:

- Alter the teaching style in schools to a student-centered method, requiring students to take responsibility for the direction of their own learning.
- Emphasize acquiring communication skills and developing creativity, innovation, and leadership among students.
- Focus on subjects and programs that prepare students to meet the demands of the labor market, such as science, math, and vocational training.
- Encourage educational institutions to build relationships with the private sector. Such partnerships do not currently exist, and students lack the opportunity to test their potential, develop interests in a specific field, and acquire useful skills.

#### 4: *Diversification of educational opportunities*

The choice of university majors and technical institutions in Bhutan remains very limited. At the current trend, out of 150,000 students only about 1,000 are in vocational institutions (mechanical, electrical, and construction work). There is a also huge demand for skilled employees in the areas of graphic design, movie editing, hardware (electronics) technician, camera personnel, filmmaking, and publication design. Similarly, opportunities exist for diverse learning, which will later help students find jobs more easily. Programs that address tourism or hospitality management, the country’s second largest industry, offers one major area of focus.

The Ministry of Labor and Human Resources and the Royal University of Bhutan must explore all possible areas of potential labor demand in the future. They should then initiate the development of new curricula offering appropriate programs to meet that demand. It is therefore vital for the government to strategically diversify educational programs in Bhutan, so that the demand for skilled and technical manpower can be met and the youth unemployment problem can be solved simultaneously.

## Conclusion

Bhutan has undergone a great deal of change since it first opened its borders to the outside world and embarked upon the path of education reform. Now, as living standards improve and the importance of education is recognized, Bhutan’s academic system must continue reforming to meet the needs of a modern society and a growing economy. From increasing the number of schools to changing the style of teaching, Bhutan’s Government, educational institutions, the private sector, and students themselves must work together to create a system that will be able to advance Bhutan’s development.

The education system must be more responsive to the growing demand for specialized labor in the Bhutanese job market and it should emphasize practical and technical skills in school curricula. But equally important is the need to change social perceptions and incentives that currently favor scarce civil service employment over abundant private sector opportunities. Only when the country’s education system and private sector complement each other can Bhutan sustain economic growth and create professional opportunities for its graduates.

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*CIPE's 2007 International Youth Essay Competition asked young people aged 18-30 to share their ideas about citizenship, democratic and market-oriented reform, and youth leadership. Kinley Rinchen's essay, which won an honorable mention in the 'Educational Reform and Employment' category, was written in response to the question: How can your country reform the educational system to give young people the right skills and opportunities to enter the workforce? To learn more about the essay competition, visit [www.cipe.org/essay](http://www.cipe.org/essay).*

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