

University  
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Development

# Education at the root of Bhutan's growth plans



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In James Hilton's 1933 classic, *Lost Horizon*, Shangri-La was a tiny isolated paradise in the Himalayas, where people lived in near perfection.

The Kingdom of Bhutan bears strong geographical likenesses – mountainous remoteness makes communication difficult within and without, and the country kept to itself well into the 20th century. But it also confronts highly intertwined real-world issues – needs that include improving the economy, literacy rates and the education system as a whole. To prosper, Bhutan needs more educated and literate citizens.

Forty years ago, Bhutan's infant mortality rate, at 300 per 1,000, was ten times Canada's. By the last decade, modern medicine had reduced this by two-thirds, raising a new challenge: strengthening Bhutan's school system to handle all the children now reaching elementary-school age. At current growth rates, now among the world's highest, Bhutan's population will double between 2000 and 2020. Meanwhile, the average monthly income for a

family of eight is \$46 US, and this poverty often contributes to low education rates for both sexes. For women, education leads to greater employment and fewer births – both significant for Bhutan.

Bhutan's 2001 human resource development plan for education projected, by 2010, enrolment increases of 78 percent in primary schools, 176 percent in junior highs and 600 percent in high schools. Planners estimated this calls for more than doubling Bhutan's number of teachers, from 3,000 to 7,000, in an education system already working to increase quality. Improving both the numbers and capacities of Bhutan's educational leaders will improve students' classroom learning.

## Training headmasters

Part of the solution to this complex puzzle has been a Canadian-Bhutanese effort to train large numbers of qualified school administrators and headmasters in the country, and to teach district education officers to mentor more

proteges. The project, called "Leadership for Quality Basic Education in Bhutan," is funded by the Canadian International Development Agency through the University Partnerships in Cooperation and Development program and run cooperatively by St. Francis Xavier University and Bhutan's National Institute of Education.

"It has been established that the leadership can make a difference in the quality of education in our schools," says Jagar Dorji, director of the National Institute of Education in Paro, Bhutan, and co-director of the project.

Bhutanese authorities understand that a good basic education system requires a strong higher education system, not only to build the capacity of teachers and principals for managing and improving the basic education system but also to help direct societal change. Pema Thinley, Secretary, Ministry of Education, notes that a dynamic tertiary education process helps to focus and direct basic education as Bhutan

moves from an agriculture-based society to a more diversified economy. Knowing it can't specialize in every discipline, the Bhutanese government has opted to create its very first master's program in education, with the intent of strengthening the education system as a whole to build the expertise needed in all sectors of the economy.

Through the St.FX-Bhutan partnership, Bhutanese students come to St.FX each summer to take master's-level education courses in leading and running schools. Canadian faculty members travel to Bhutan each January to work with students and consult with faculty at the newly established Royal University of Bhutan. By 2007, the Royal University will begin to award its own domestic degrees for education courses that were started in cooperation with St.FX.

## A relationship of trust

The process has taught Canadian and Bhutanese administrators and students ever-deeper trust in important, yet intangible, ways, as they learn each other's knowledge, cultures, traditions and strengths.

Canadian and Bhutanese planners agreed strongly on parallel goals from the start and cooperated to adapt each other's ideas to suit Bhutan's needs.

"It's very important to go there first, to get to know people, and to assume that you are going to learn far more than you're going to

teach," says Ann Sherman, chair of the education department at St.FX in Antigonish and co-director of the project. "We have learned a great deal about ourselves, about our own public education here, about the way we organize things. We would be foolish to think that we have everything to teach and they have everything to learn."

## Key connections

Dr. Sherman says St.FX began ties with Bhutan a decade-plus ago, when she met Bhutanese students during her master's of education program at the University of New Brunswick.

"Some of these same people are now the people who are key connections in Bhutan, working in the ministry of education. They consider us trustworthy colleagues and friends, I think because of the long-standing relationship," she says.

Jim Greenlaw, St.FX's project manager, says that Bhutan's compact population and landmass – an estimated 650,000 in an area the size of Switzerland – also helps the project influence national policy. When his plane landed in Bhutan's capital three years ago, most of the 50-odd ministers, educators and civil servants he needed to see were there to meet him.

"This may be the case in other small countries as well. There are a few key decision-makers in the ministry of education and the personnel department of the government who

have come to trust us over the last six years or so," says Dr. Greenlaw. "To be influencing policy, you have to have developed a long-standing relationship of trust."

## Higher education: a springboard

Bhutan's ambassador to Canada, Daw Penjo, places the start of the Canada-Bhutan relationship in the '60s. Bhutan's small population has had a limited capacity to train people domestically, and needs to send almost half of its university students abroad, he says. Fortunately, virtually all Bhutanese students return home to work, partly because they usually attain responsible posts quite quickly on their return. In time, many of these foreign-trained professionals take on key decisions in national policies.

The project strengthens Bhutan's capacity to train its own education leaders and reduce the country's reliance on foreign training. This should have a ripple effect educationally, and ultimately economically – the Bhutanese clearly see education as a base for building other needed capacities, including medicine, water management and engineering.

"Education," Mr. Penjo says, "is at the root of it all."

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*Photo: Bhutanese students listen to the headmaster at a middle secondary school assembly.*

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