OPEN UNIVERSITY OF NEPAL: A GLOBAL VISION OF HIGHER EDUCATION FOR THE DISADVANTAGED PEOPLE

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Abstract

Nepal has a historically stratified society resulting in systemic disadvantage for its majority population. Despite the fact that education has been long identified as a way to emancipate the people from social and economic disadvantages, the access to higher education remains a distant dream for a large mass. A way to provide them higher education and skills for their employment and better life can be through open and distance learning with flexible access policy. In 2010, Non-Resident Nepali Association (NRNA), the global Nepali diaspora organization, declared the Open University of Nepal (OUN) Initiative as its flagship project and spearheaded the movement to establish the OUN. Continued struggle in this movement has led to tabling the Open University of Nepal Bill in the Nepal’s Legislature-Parliament on July 2015. This has now showed the rays of hope for all disadvantaged Nepali adults towards access to higher education. This case-study paper describes the historical development and efforts gone into this initiative by Nepali diaspora, who hold a key stake in the initiative.

Introduction

Nepal has a historically stratified society strained by socio-economic underperformance, stark geographic ruggedness and internal conflicts, resulting in systemic disadvantage for its majority population. Despite the fact that education has been long identified as a way to emancipate the people from social and economic disadvantages, the access to higher education remains a distant dream for a large mass.

In 2014, 350,000 students from Grade 1 to 10 dropped out from Nepal’s school system, while about sixty percent Grade 10 students fail in School Leaving Certificate (SLC) national examination annually. Majority of those without high schools certificates or skills training have poor prospect for employment in the country. Consequently, youth, especially from rural areas, are fleeing to foreign countries to take
menial jobs in a hope to change their fortunes. A way to provide them higher education and skills for their employment and better life can be through open and distance learning with flexible access policy.

Nepal is currently establishing Open University of Nepal (OUN) as a national university of open and distance learning to enhance the access to higher education for the masses. It took sustained efforts of Nepali diaspora for OUN to become a priority agenda of the government, which remained dormant for two decades. Diaspora scholars took this situation as a cause worth contributing. Consequently, they set the vision, mission and roadmap for the establishment of a unique, modern, high quality, relevant, equitable and readily accessible institution of higher learning for all people. The original Nepali diaspora proponents of OUN set the following objectives for embarking the initiative (Dhakal et. al., 2010):

1) to close the gap in higher education demand, currently unmet by the combined capacity of existing institutions;
2) to take tertiary education to the rural, remote, and marginalized people, including women and Dalits who are practically confined to the villages due to family obligations and social-economic challenges;
3) to provide opportunities for teachers, government employees and private sector employees who are unable to advance their education, skills and careers in existing system;
4) to provide a mechanism to continue education for the youth who take employment in foreign countries; and
5) to advance a computer-based education in rural Nepal that relates to health, social systems, productivity, economic improvement, and sustainability disciplines.

The active involvement of Nepali diaspora in establishing OUN is in itself a new paradigm shift in the higher education system of the country, and perhaps a novel initiative among global diaspora population. Considering special geographic, demographic and socio-economic context of Nepal, this work is one of special significance (Dhakal, 2011). The Nepali diaspora hold a key stake in the initiative and are now working closely with Ministry of Education (MoE), Government of Nepal (GoN). This case-study paper presents historical development of these diaspora efforts on OUN initiative.

**Methodology**

This case-study was carried out through an environmental scan of the documentary evidence related to the sequence of events from the time when Nepali diaspora undertook the inception of the idea for an inclusive higher education access in Nepal to the recent developments that have taken place.

**Results and Discussion**

**The Barriers of Access to Higher Education**

There are geographic, demographic and socio-economic barriers that limit access to higher education in Nepal. The major barriers are presented below.

a. ‘Highs’ and ‘Lows’ in the Society

Nepal has a highly stratified society, originating from traditional structures of ‘highs’ and ‘lows’ (Rasali, 2012). Furthermore, geography of high Himalayas, middle mountains and low Terai plains divides the
country into clear zones of accessibility, and there is a divide between rural and urban population in human development. Consequently, there is a widening income gap across population groups, and a knowledge gap resulting from the divide in access between those who afford private education and those who do not. In a country where more than 80% people still live in rural areas, the limitations faced by rural people translates into majority people being in multidimensional disadvantage.

Learned people have been highly placed in the social strata from time immemorial. However, with the rise of knowledge economy, increasing sophistication of all vocations, and rapid diversification of professions, education in the 21st century has become not only the essential tool of emancipation but also of attaining survival skills and knowledge. Despite bearing powerful liberating values, access to education and learning in Nepal have never been universal in its true sense. As time is progressing, education is turning into a privilege to be purchased in the free market as per one’s purchasing power. Consequently, quality education, or even rudimentary education, has become the right to a small segment of the population, including those who enjoyed privileges through traditional roots. More acutely suffering from these uneven systemic arrangements are Dalit and disadvantaged children, who nearly entirely fail to even gain secondary-level education. Khanal (2015) reports that Dalit children’s inclusion in education is affected by a range of interconnected school and community factors. These factors could readily serve as barriers to their access to higher education.

Figure 1: Percentage of male population (15-59) attaining higher education in Nepal, by Caste/Ethnic groups, NDHS 2011
There exists a gradient of disparity across caste/ethnic groups in Nepal. Figure 1 shows higher education attainment data among age 15-59 males from various caste and ethnic groups from Nepal Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) 2011. It may be noted that higher education attainment among female population would be worse. Rasali (2015) reported that Hill Brahmin had higher education attainment as high as up to 24 times more than Hill Dalit, and up to 8 times more than Hill Janajati in specific geographic sub-regions of the country. These data clearly indicates a problem of a systemic nature with the variation in higher education attainment across caste-groups and geographic sub-regions being intolerably high.

b. The Iron Gate to Higher Education

In 1990, Nepal Government took a decision to commercialize the entire education sector from kindergarten to university level. Since then, a new form of stratification was born in education. Now money rather than the talent of a child could buy the quality education. This move also resulted in deterioration of public school education, which has been condemned to be left for the urban-poor, rural majority and entirety of remote population. The result has been that most disadvantaged students, especially those from public schools in rural and remote areas, do not get the opportunity to graduate from high schools. The overall passing rate of Grade 10 students on national School Leaving Certificate (SLC) examination, which is often called the Iron Gate to Higher Education, has been less than 50% every year (Lamsal, 2013). There is a huge accumulation of school dropouts and students failing in SLC, who have no opportunity to experience higher education. As they are living mostly in the rural and remote areas of the country, employment opportunities for them are extremely hard to come by. As a result, in the past decade, when the country liberalized foreign travel, there has been an influx of Nepali youth from rural areas to foreign countries working as unskilled labourers. Majority of these youth are without high schools education or skills training on employable vocations. The vast majority of them are employed in low paying and dangerous jobs. Of the four million Nepali youth who work abroad, three dead bodies arrive in Tribhuvan International Airport every day, and an uncountable number return with physical and psychological illness and injuries.

In contemporary Nepal, three categories of the people seem to have general access to higher education: 1) the students from urban areas, 2) those born to relatively resource-rich parents, and 3) those who can reach the colleges through their own academic excellence or earning meritorious scholarships (Rasali, 2012). This leaves the vast majority of the country’s population without access to post-secondary education. Most acutely suffering from this systemic disadvantage are the marginalized population groups such as women, Dalits and people of remote areas. Consequently, it has become urgent to find not only an efficient, economical and sustainable solution to the problem but also an effective, fair and liberating one.

Mass Education, OUN and Nepali Diaspora

The conventional problem of providing equitable opportunity of higher learning and skills that lead to employment, entrepreneurship, and dignified standing in the society, to the masses of people, including the disadvantaged, could not be solved by the conventionally employed system. However, considering that overwhelming majority population currently deprived of educational opportunities is economically poor, geographically rural or remote, employed in foreign countries, or in need of earning while learning, open and distance education is the most desirable way for providing education and skill training. It is with
this realization that the Nepali diaspora took a decision to contribute through OUN with knowledge, skills and philanthropic contributions for the cause of mass education in Nepal.

Nepali diaspora took the initiative to establish OUN in 2009 after years of studies, brainstorming, fact-finding and planning. The diaspora mass is poised to make intellectual and financial contributions towards establishment and operation of the stated university through the network of their global organization, Non-Resident Nepali Association (NRNA). The NRNA’s Task Force for OUN has been spearheading the work with an aim to tap on the vast academic human resource of Nepali diaspora. NRNA President Shesh Ghale’s recent public commitment for raising necessary funds from among diaspora and international sources indicates the importance of Nepali diaspora’s crucial role.

Sustained efforts since 2009 for the establishment of Open University led to tabling of a bill in the Legislature Parliament of Nepal in January 2011, but Nepal’s parliament was dissolved in May 2012 as and when the bill had reached the voting stage. Despite that, and similar other setbacks, the effort continued. This led to tabling the Open University of Nepal Bill at the Legislature Parliament on July 31, 2015. This has again fueled the hope for all disadvantaged and marginalized Nepali adults towards access to higher education.

Among others, the people who can directly benefit from the OUN come under one or more of the following major categories: 1) women who are forced to remain housewives; 2) the people who are living in rural and remote areas of Nepal; 3) the people who are from traditionally disadvantaged ethnic groups, especially as Dalits and other disadvantaged communities; 4) the people who are working in foreign lands without any higher education attainment; 5) the people who had experienced hardship in their previous higher education; 6) the people who are in need to change or advance their careers; 7) the people who are in need to pursue learning while earning their living; and 8) the people who are in need to adopt new vocations without need to leave their communities. Satisfying such a need for access, quality, diversity, choice and economy on education and training to the stated target population is, therefore, a monumental challenge.

The special arrangement for mobilizing thousands of diaspora academics, scientists and skilled professionals to fulfill the need of human resource for Open University of Nepal is a novel initiative taken by Nepali diaspora (Dhakal, 2011). There are more than a thousand Nepalese academics who are faculty members of universities around the world, who can contribute directly as the faculty members of the OUN. Even more numerous are successful scientists, professionals, skilled workers and business entrepreneurs.

The trend at the moment in Nepal is such that most youth who score distinctions in their Grade 12, Bachelor’s or Master’s Degree examinations go to industrialized countries for further studies. And, nearly all of them settle there. Considering that more Ph.D. degree holders of Nepali origin are already abroad than in Nepal, we can imagine simply that overwhelming majority of Nepali Ph.D. scholars will be abroad within 10 years.

Today, Nepali diaspora is largely composed of first generation immigrants carrying great affinity for Nepal and intrinsic motivation to do good for the society they left behind. Many who have come to latter part of their career cycle are seeking institutionalized avenues for making intellectual and skill contribution as well as financial contribution to Nepal. Such a mass is only increasing rapidly. Therefore,
Nepali diaspora members are poised to play an instrumental role in establishing and operating OUN system.

**History of Diaspora Engagement in Open University of Nepal**

**a. From initiation of idea to action group formation**

The idea of having an Open University was not new to Nepal. Time and again, the government of Nepal has shown policy directions and started allocating funds to explore the feasibility for establishing Open University in the country (Dhakal et. al., 2010). However, overwhelming consideration was given to expanding the higher education access generally in the country rather than as a potent solution for educating masses of disadvantaged sub-populations. Past efforts also did not particularly pay significant focus on how it can be operationalized to benefit the disadvantaged population groups. It was in 2009 over a serious conversation that the first two authors of this case-study who on behalf of Canada Foundation for Nepal (CFFN) undertook a task to address the issue of access-gap and inequity in Nepal’s higher education specifically, systemically, and institutionally through Open University of Nepal (OUN) propelled by diaspora skills, knowledge, innovations and resources.

A ground-breaking decision of Non-Resident Nepali Association-International Coordinating Council (NRNA-ICC) during its Regional Conference, Houston, USA to undertake OUN as its flagship project and the release of a background paper by Dhakal et. al. (2010) laid the foundation for the initiative for a global vision of higher education in Nepal. A group of diaspora then carried the initiative forward, with a dedicated leadership of Dr. Pramod Dhakal. A large number of well-recognised Nepali faculty academics from many universities around the world rallied behind him throughout these years. To that effect, the GoN also responded positively to the call of NRNA-ICC for OUN initiative. The major team formation efforts have been as follows:

1. Concept precursors: CFFN AGM (May 10, 2008), NRN Canada Conference (June 27, 2009), NRNA Global Conference Kathmandu (October 14, 2009)
2. First Task Force, comprised of CFFN and NRNA Regional Representatives for North Americas (December 2009)-Initial Proponents (P. Dhakal, A. Adhikari, D. Rasali)
3. First NRNA Technical Team (February 2010) – Proponents (P. Dhakal, A. Adhikari, D. Rasali, R. Adhikari)
4. OUN Strategic Committee (May 2010)- Proponents and other stakeholders (P. Dhakal, Chair)
5. First NRNA SKI Task Force (post May 2010)- Proponents and other stakeholders (R. Adhikari, Coordinator)
6. Open University of Nepal Steering Committee (October 2010) – diaspora proponents and government representatives (Secretary of MoE, Chair, NRNA President Co-Chair, P.Dhakal, Member-Secretary and full-time office bearer)
7. Strategic Planning Team, Functional Teams, and Working Groups of academics and professionals (January 2011) (P.Dhakal, Coordinator)
8. NRNA OUN Task Force, (December 2013) (P. Dhakal, Chair)
b. Workshops and Meetings

Since the inception of the idea of Nepali diaspora’s role in 2009, the following sequence of milestone events were spearheaded by Nepali diaspora leadership for the OUN:

1. NRN Delegation to Athabasca University, Canada, December 4, 2009
2. SKI Workshop, Melbourne, Australia, February 10, 2010
3. OUN Workshop at NRNA Regional Conference, Houston, USA, May 28, 2010
4. 1st OUN Planning Meeting, Ottawa, August 9, 2010
5. 2nd OUN Planning Meeting at NRNA Regional Conference, Sydney, Australia, October 7, 2010
7. Meeting with Canadian representatives on Joint Resolution, Kathmandu, October 8, 2010
8. 3rd OUN Planning Meeting Ottawa, Canada, January 7, 2011
9. Collaboration Meeting at University of Manitoba, Canada, March 4, 2011
10. 4th OUN Planning Meeting, Ottawa, Canada, August 1, 2011
11. OUN Workshop at the 5th NRNA Global Conference, Kathmandu, Nepal, October 11, 2011
12. 1st Workshop on pedagogical model for OUN, January 4, 2012
13. OUN interaction program with California State University, Kathmandu, April 4, 2012
14. NRN-Canada/CFFN Study Tours and Consultations at Athabasca University, May 18, 2012
17. Meeting on OUN with Open Universities Australia (OUA), July 17, 2012
18. OUN Workshop on OUN, NRNA Regional Conference, Sydney, Australia, August 1, 2012
19. 2nd Workshop on Pedagogical Model for OUN, Kathmandu, January 04, 2013
20. OUN Workshop, 6th NRNA Global Conference, Kathmandu, October 18, 2013
22. NRNA OUN Task Force/NRN-Canada/CFFN Open University of Nepal Planning Meeting, BCIT Burnaby Campus, British Columbia, Canada, Friday, August 8, 2014
23. Meeting on Positioning of NRNA Role in OUN with MoE, Kathmandu, October 24, 2014
25. NRNA SKI Workshop on Sydney, Australia, July 19, 2014
26. Joint Meeting on OUN between OUUK, MoE, UGC and NRNA, Kathmandu, July 24, 2014
27. OUN Planning Workshop, NRN-Canada/CFFN, Vancouver, Canada, August 8, 2014
28. Collaboration Meeting: NRNA and California State University, California, August 13, 2014
29. Collaboration Meeting: Northern Alberta Institute of Technology, Canada, August 19, 2014
30. Collaboration Meeting with President of Athabasca University, Canada, August 21, 2014
31. Interactions with Nepalese Diaspora Communities in Canadian Cities, August 8-30, 2014
32. Collaboration Meeting with Commonwealth of Learning, Vancouver, Canada, September 3, 2014
33. Workshop on OUN Legislative Initiatives with MPs, NRNA Day, Kathmandu, August 10, 2014
34. Theory of Change Workshop on OUN with OU-UK, Kathmandu, November 18, 2014
35. 3rd Workshop on Pedagogical Model for OUN, Kathmandu, January 28, 2015-08-27
c. Major Memoranda of Understandings and Documents

Since the inception of the idea of Nepali diaspora’s role in 2009, several agreements were signed among various key stakeholders of OUN initiative. The following major documents, compiled in the OUN White Paper (Dhakal, 2014), form the bases of initial activities of the OUN to move forward on the steps of its formation:


d. Commitment from Government of Nepal

Ever since the diaspora engagement in OUN initiative, the representatives of the GoN have been playing a positive role in supporting the initiative. Ambassadors of Nepal to Canada Dr. Bhojraj Pokhrel and Ambassador of Nepal to the USA Dr. Shankar Sharma attended several conferences, meetings and workshop in support of the initiative and taken the matter to the GoN. This has led to the MoE responding positively. In 2010, Minister Sarvendra Nath Sukla took special interest to work with NRNA collaboratively in the initiative and jointly signed a ground-breaking resolution along with the then NRNA President Devman Hirachan, and the MoE’s high officials, especially former Secretaries Deependra Vikram Thapa, Janardan Nepal and Mahasharam Sharma enthusiastically followed up. Support of many ministers, members of parliament and government officials played instrumental role in adopting the proposition of the NRNA and diaspora representative in Nepal, Dr. Pramod Dhakal. Though there have been many ups and downs of the level of support to the Nepali diaspora initiative by the government, the perseverance of promoters within the diaspora, government and the public has paid off in the end. This has finally culminated into tabling of a bill for the OUN in Legislature Parliament of Nepal. However, there needs to be greater trust among the lawmakers, policymakers, and decision-makers of Nepal towards institutionally sustained engagement of Nepali diaspora in the educational advancement of the masses. Proper legal and institutional framework will be instrumental in utilizing the full benefit of diaspora human capital to the benefit of Nepali people.

Conclusions

Nepali diaspora have committed their efforts with a vision to establish an institutionalized system for inclusive access to higher education to benefit the Nepalese learners both within the country and abroad. These efforts are examples of unconditional commitment of highly qualified and internationally
recognized Nepali academics to provide leadership and support to higher education system in Nepal. Capitalizing this commitment, bestowing leadership, responsibility, and accountability, to Nepali diaspora on OUN is a befitting approach for Nepal to make the OUN sustainable and successful. This carries a global vision of higher education focussing on its access to the masses, with institutional focus for bringing the disadvantaged segment of the population to the mainstream of educational achievements and for prosperity of Nepal.

References


