

1. CRITICAL ISSUES IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN NEPAL

Introduction

Though Nepal has achieved remarkable progress in higher education development since early 1970s when the Government started to implement the National Education System Plan (NESP), the university is facing increasing financial constraints, managerial problems and quality deterioration in teaching and learning. Five critical issues in the current higher education development in Nepal are: (a) the over rapid expansion of enrolment; (b) the under-financing of the higher education system; (c) the low level of managerial effectiveness; (d) the irrational structure of the system, and (e) quality erosion.

Prior to the establishment of TU in 1959, Nepal had only a few small colleges affiliated with Indian universities. Since that date, however, Nepalese higher education has become virtually synonymous with TU. Mahendra Sanskrit University has about 1000 students which offers the study of Sanskrit to a very restricted group and Kathmandu University, a private sector university, has about 700 students in the Schools of Sciences, Management and Engineering. By 1992 enrolment in TU had risen to about 155,000 students scattered over 195 campuses (65 public and 130 private) throughout the country. Of this student body, about 61 percent was at the Certificate Level, 30 percent was at the Bachelor's degree level, and 8 percent was at the Master's degree level. There are about 400 doctoral level candidates working over the years on dissertation writing.

TU enrolments are highly skewed in other respects as well. In 1992, more than 80 percent of the student body was enrolled in Humanities, Social Sciences, Management, and Law; less than 10 percent was in Engineering, Agriculture, Forestry, or Medicine. Only about 24 percent of all students were female, and they accounted for only 15 percent of science-related enrolments. Moreover, a significant number of girls attended one large women's multi-faculty campus and nursing campuses.

Graduation from secondary school and admission to higher education are determined by a single examination, the Secondary School Leaving Certificate (SLC) examination, which is administered after grade 10. Although only a fraction of students who enter primary school ever complete all ten years and pass the SLC, all who do are automatically eligible to enter Certificate programmes at the university. Dropout and repetition rates are high during the first two years of the university (41 percent and 36 percent, respectively), and only about 31 percent of a cohort complete four years on schedule. After obtaining the two-year Certificate (after 12 years of education), many students may not go on to obtain a Bachelor's degree, since the Certificate enables them to teach primary school or become mid-level technicians.

Thus, as greater numbers of students have completed grade 10 successfully, pressures on the TU system have mounted. Enrolment increases have not been met with commensurate investments in the human, physical or institutional infrastructure of TU, and the quality of higher education has suffered accordingly. Neither the structure nor the financing of the institution has kept pace with the dramatic growth in enrolments, and the situation has reached crisis proportions. It has become increasingly clear to all parties that reforms must be made if Nepal is to develop and maintain a university system capable of meeting the manpower demands of the twenty-first century. The Government, which has become aware of the higher education problems and is dealing with increasingly articulate body of TU students, is beginning to review its policies regarding all aspects of higher education and has invited IDA to participate in and support these reform efforts.

The Runaway enrolment

Firstly, the rate of increase of Nepalese higher education enrolment in recent years has been very rapid. The total number of university students in 1975 was 22,765. It reached 34,094 in 1980, 54,636 in 1985 and 115,772 in 1990. It is striking to see that the higher education enrolment in Nepal doubled in the five years from 1985 to 1990, tripled in ten years from 1980 to 1990, quadrupled in fifteen years from 1975 to 1990. The higher education enrolment ratio exceeded 5 percent in 1991, which is a remarkable situation for one of the lowest income countries in the world, considering the median enrolment ratio in higher education for similar countries is about 3.7 percent. As the population of Nepal increased and access to primary and secondary education expanded, demographic pressure on the university increased sharply. Furthermore, according to the current 7% per annum rate of growth, it is projected that without appropriate restraints, the enrolment will double again from 1990 to 1995 from 115,772 to 230,000, and would reach over 300,000 by the year 2000. This dramatic expansion of enrolment causes many problems. The increase of the university student population has outstripped the rate of increase of the Government appropriation to higher education. Thus the per student allocation in constant prices has been decreasing dramatically in recent years. Infrastructural investments have been narrowly focused on a few externally aided campuses, so that the physical facilities in many other campuses are badly overstretched. Local campus administrations lack authority to limit admissions to available capacity. The quality inputs per student, such as teachers skills, classrooms and laboratories, library books, have also been declining. The current physical capacity of the university is only 30,000 to 40,000 students, if run on single shift basis; 60,000 to 70,000 if run two shifts. The current student population is 115,772, requiring many campuses to run three or four shifts, probably resulting in deterioration of higher education quality.

Secondly, the rapid expansion of higher education without the sufficient attention to the economies of scale and cost-effectiveness has led to the establishment of many very small campuses. The number of campuses increased from 70 in 1975 to 195 (including 65 constituent campuses and 130 affiliated campuses) in 1992, while the average size of the campuses has remained below 600 students. The resulting diseconomies of scale have led an estimated 20% efficiency loss in resource utilization.

Thirdly, the rapid expansion of higher education is producing more university graduates than the labour market can absorb because of the deteriorating economic situation of the country. A recent survey on education and employment in Nepal showed that more than 25 percent of the university graduates in Nepal have been working on jobs requiring less education than they obtained. Experience has shown that this under-utilization of educated manpower usually leads to a higher turnover rate, lower job satisfaction and reduced productivity. There also is an increasing number of unemployment of university graduates in Nepal.

Under-Financing of Higher Education

Though the current data available on sources of higher education financing and structure of expenditure are inconsistent, an initial assessment of the existing information indicates that Nepalese higher education is seriously under funded. This is indicated by:

i. The relatively small percentage of GDP devoted to higher education. It is necessary to point out that in 1990, the total spending on education in Nepal is only 2.1 percent of GDP and the spending on higher education is only about 0.44 of GDP, much below the international average of about 4.6 percent of GDP for total spending on education and 0.7 to 1.2 percent of GDP for higher education. However, it is unlikely in the short term that such funding can come from the public purse and the mobilization of additional resources would need to depend upon cost-sharing and cost-recovery approaches.

ii. The real resources available to higher education have been declining dramatically in recent years, because the rate of inflation has been higher than the rate of increase of State appropriation for the sub-sector, and also because the share of the Government expenditures on higher education in the total education appropriation has decreased from about 30% in early and mid 1980s to 21% in early 1990s.

iii. An increasingly larger proportion of the higher education recurrent expenditure has been set aside for salary payment. Currently, about 90 percent of the university's recurrent expenditure goes for salaries of teachers and staff, thus there is a serious shortage of non-salary recurrent expenditure for instructional purposes, such as chemicals and other consumable materials for laboratories, reference books for teachers and students, and supplies for instructional purposes.

iv. Although 90 percent of the higher education recurrent expenditure is used to pay staff salaries, the average teachers' income and benefits are significantly lower than that of employees of industries and the private sector with similar educational backgrounds. Thus more than 90 percent of the professors take a second job after teaching a second shift in an affiliated campus in order to support their families.

v. Except for a few externally supported specialties, a lack of capital investments for the past ten years has led to a serious shortage of classrooms, laboratories and other facilities. From 1985 to 1991, the enrolment doubled, but no new classrooms and laboratories and other facilities were built in the university campuses. Many university students have to attend two-shift or three-shift, even occasionally, four-shift campuses.

vi. Shortage of funds for updating curriculum and teaching materials meant that most of the curricula have not been updated since early 1970s, some of them were actually developed in mid 1960s. The equipment in the university laboratories are not only out of date, (most of which are products of the 1960s), but also in serious shortage. The equipment and other facilities of chemistry laboratories at the Kirtipur campus were built in the 1960s for 24 students, but now more than 130 students use them.

vii. Building maintenance is not carried out due to the serious lack of funds. Many classrooms and laboratory buildings are in serious disrepair. Many classrooms have no glass in the windows, making them unsuitable for morning shift classes at 6:30 am in winter.

viii. The university library has had to cut half of its subscriptions of academic journals this year because of shortage of funds. For example, the allowance is so low it had stopped subscribing to important journals for science teaching, which it has provided for many years.

The under-financing of higher education in Nepal is caused by many reasons.

First, the economic austerity of the country and the financial constraint of the Government have limited the resources available to higher education.

Second, the centralized control of higher education finance might be also relevant. Most of the funds for the university come from the central ministry, allocated according to rigid norms on a non-fungible line item basis from the university's central administration to each campus, which have to spend the money as specified by the central administration. The local governments and communities have no part in financing higher education. Such a centralized system for higher education finance stifles initiatives and innovations for mobilization of additional resources for education by local governments, communities, and university campuses.

Third, absence of cost-sharing and cost-recovery is also an important reason for under financing. Across all the different levels and types of studies in the university system, the costs of higher education have been mainly financed by the Government. There is an absence of consciousness of the need for cost-sharing and cost-recovery from both the users and providers of the higher education services. The beneficiaries of higher education investments have taken the free higher education for granted, (the nominal tuition fee, until recently was only Rs 20 per month, much lower than the secondary school tuition) while the university has faced an increasing financial burden to fully finance the functioning of the system. Without significant cost-sharing and cost-recovery improvement of the higher education, particularly instructional quality is unlikely. Recently, some initial cost-sharing and cost-recovery strategies have been initiated by the new university leadership, which increased the tuition fees from Rs 20 to Rs 40 per month (a nominal increase but the first time this has been done in 18 years), and has tried to mobilize more resources from different sources.

Fourth, the under finance of the system is also related to the lack of financial incentives for efficiency gains. The current resource allocation approach is not based on thorough analyses of the cost behaviour of education activities, thus it is neither fully transparent, nor does it encourage efficiency gains in better using the limited financial resources. For example, under the current appropriation approach, if a university campus raises its internal efficiency by raising student-teacher ratio from 20:1 to 25:1, the campus could not benefit from the cost-saving of the reduction of personnel expenditures, such as reallocating the saving for raising the salaries of the existing teachers or improving the physical conditions of campus. Instead, the campus would receive less resources from the central administration.

Fifth, weak financial management at grass-root level worsens the situation. (a) Many campuses do not have very well kept financial management records. (b) Some campus administrators have little sense of cost-effectiveness and even less sense for developing institutional strategies for better financing their institutions, such as getting communities and parents involved in financing their institutions, generating revenues by work-study programmes and other self-financing strategies. Some of the campus administrators even do not know how much funds they received for each categories of expenditures for the previous schools years and how the funds were used. (c) There is a dearth of modern technologies and equipment, such as computers, for more effective financial management.

Managerial Problems

At present in Nepal, the principal body of the higher education system is one university -- Tribhuvan University, which consists of 65 "constituent campuses" and 130 associated campuses", enrolling more than 99 percent of the total higher education students in the whole country. The constituent campuses are public funded, accounting for about 80 percent of the enrolment. The associated campuses are privately funded, accounting for about 20 percent of the total enrolment. In 1986, four very small campuses were separated from the Tribhuvan University to form a new university -- Mahendra University, which has only one very specific field of study -- Sanskrit Studies enrolling only about 1000 students, accounting for less than 1 percent of the total higher education enrolment. One private university -- Kathmandu University was established in 1992 with about 700 students enrolled in Science, Management and Engineering Schools. Therefore, functionally, the current higher education system in Nepal is Tribhuvan University System, with a total of 195 campuses including both constituent and affiliated campuses. The King is the Chancellor of the University, and honorary and symbolic position. The Minister of Education is the Pro-Chancellor, and has the major responsibilities for general education, but seldom interfere in University affairs. The university is governed by the University Council, which consists of about 85 members, functioning as the board of trustees or board of regents of universities in some other countries. The daily operation of the university system is managed by the Vice-Chancellor, assisted by the Rector, the chief academic officer, and the Registrar, the chief administrative officer. For a long time, the system has not been managed very effectively. Recently, there was a change of university leadership. The new Vice-Chancellor and his staff have tried very hard to improve the managerial effectiveness of the system. Though some positive changes have started, the current university system is still suffering from a legacy of managerial problems. The major ones are:

a. Over-Centralized Decision-Making and Control

The administrative system of Nepalese higher education is over-centralized and has become virtually ossified. The central administration has absolute authority over **almost every** aspect of higher education activities in the country, including (a) financing the system as mentioned above; (b) control the operation of the system; (c) determining the curriculum and instructional objectives; (d) setting goals by examinations for students' learning for intermediate stages and for the overall system completion; (e) control on the content of teaching including course offerings, student course assignment rules, and syllabi for courses of study; (f) textbook development and distribution and (g) controlling the hiring, firing and promoting of all the employees of the university system. The local governments have been given no responsibility and authority for higher education at all. This has been confirmed by all the campus chiefs. All decisions are made at the central level, even a decision for hiring or firing a janitor. The chief executives of the university campuses, appointed by the central administration, are actually serving as arms of the central administration to insure that the campuses operated on the track and maintain minimum standards set by the centre. The districts and cities and local communities have little to do with the operation of higher education.

This over-centralized decision making and control on the higher education system has posed extremely heavy managerial pressure on the central administration for the direct daily operation of the campuses, thus preventing it from doing better or the more crucial functions such as macro policy formulations, overall coordination of higher educational development in responding to the labour market needs, improving national curriculum for better learning of students, and creating and maintaining a better institutional environment for more efficient and more effective, and more equitable provision higher education services to the whole country. Over-centralization has prevented local participation in higher education decision-making and in promoting educational development embodying consideration of the varied socio-economic conditions of different regions and specific local needs, thus the higher education system lacks flexibility.

b. Limited Authority to Campuses

Despite the large topographical obstacles that separate many parts of the country from Kathmandu, individual campuses have extremely limited administrative control of their operations. For example, they do not have the authority to set or modify course content, or even score the examinations of their students. Although technically the campuses are supposed to determine enrolment, TU's central office has in practice set campus enrolment at levels relative to demand pressure. Personnel decisions are made at the central level. Although poorly trained, most university employees are permanent, and no monitoring mechanisms are used to assess their performance. As a result, campus chiefs have very limited control over their staff and the quality of education they deliver. Having few opportunities for leadership, the management skills of campus chiefs are weak.

c. Decentralized Admissions

Although most aspects of TU management are overly centralized, one crucial element -- namely, admissions -- is inappropriately decentralized. Students often make independent applications to many campuses and wait to be admitted by the campus of their highest choice before turning down others. This system delays the admission of wait-listed students as well as the commencement and end of the academic year. Students also have the option of enrolling in two campuses and occupying scarce dormitory rooms in each. If campuses had technological support, enrolments could be streamlined through computerized coordination.

d. Entrance Examinations

Separate entrance examinations to the university would allow the university authorities to resist demands for admission and to limit the number of entrants. However, such a system was abandoned in 1979 following student demonstrations. At present, only certain faculties accounting for 10 percent of enrolments (e.g., Medicine, Engineering, Forestry, Agriculture and Animal Science) have entrance examinations. The Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences rely only on the SLC results. The variable percent of students passing SLC each year makes university authorities unable to plan operations on the basis of a desirable and predictable number of students.

University admissions each year consist of close to 75-85 percent of the previous year's SLC passes. The demand for enrolment is thus closely linked to the SLC pass rate. In many countries, when a leaving examination is used as an entrance examination, admissions are controlled by limiting the number of graduates. Students who otherwise may have mastered enough material to graduate from secondary school become dropouts instead, at considerable systemic and social expense. Of the 95,100 candidates who took SLC in 1992, only 23,213 (24 percent) passed. Despite the large number of failures, admissions are not restricted to tolerable levels commensurate with TU capacity and resource availability. The SLC examination is not developed or scored through psychometric techniques that would set reliable cut-off scores, and the Government cannot predict or control how many students pass it each year. When large percent of students pass (e.g., 47 percent in 1991), campuses come under intense pressure to admit as many applicants as possible without getting more funds. As a result, campuses are inundated with entrants they cannot adequately accommodate.

e. The Centralized Examination System

The centralized administration and scoring of annual examinations is another unusual feature of TU. Its original purpose, when the university was much smaller, was to minimize possible corruption and to control the quality of private campuses. Examination questions for all courses in all faculties are decided in Kathmandu and sent to individual campuses. Answer papers are sent to Kathmandu and then redistributed throughout the country to professors who get paid a fee to score them at home. Most results are recorded manually at the Controller of Examinations Office and distributed to students. The scoring process, particularly for the Humanities faculty, takes about four months as students generate approximately 700,000 answer papers per year. Besides the expense and inefficiency involved in moving and scoring these

papers, the process directly affects instructional delivery, because students must take approximately a month off to study, and examinations must be scheduled over several days so that there is no time conflict for students who must still pass courses of previous years.

f. Weak Campus Level Leadership

Since the overall university system is over-centralized, the institutional leadership of campuses, is inevitably weak, indicated by (a) an inability of the campus management to set the goals and directions for the campus, as these are determined by the higher level authorities; (b) campus management has no power to hire and fire teachers and other employees; (c) the campus chiefs usually have no authority to promote teachers and provide incentives for better performance, thus there is no systematic evaluation of work performance of employees; (d) campuses can not adjust the curriculum according to the specific local labour market needs; and (e) campus administrators lack preparation for managerial and financial responsibilities. Some administrators admit that they do not have sufficient power and authority to make tough decisions. If an employee does not do a good job, campus administrators can do very little about it. This relatively weak middle and lower level management has resulted in the situation that many employees do not fully fulfill their duties, and in teachers absenteeism to teach on time.

g. Overstaffing

Another managerial problem is over-staffing of administrative employees. Currently, the university has 5,400 teachers, but the administrative personnel has reached 6,933 (administrative staff 2276, technical staff 1528 and other utility staff 3129 including 2207 peons), exceeding the teaching faculty by 25 percent. The new leadership of the university has been well aware this problem. However, it is very difficult to tackle this problem for political reasons. As for the teaching force, the main problems are: (a) The low quality of the faculty members; currently, only 3.8 percent of faculty members have a doctoral degree, 2.85 percent of the faculty members are professors; and (b) the low morale of teachers because of the low incomes.

h. Facilities Utilization

The total number of university campuses increased from 79 in 1975 to 195 in 1991. Most of the campuses are small (with an average capacity for 600 students), often offer very similar programmes, and sometimes are placed within a few kilometers of each other. Despite the large number of campuses, facilities overall are grossly inadequate for the student body and if operated on a conventional single-shift system, would be able to accommodate only 30,000 to 40,000 students. Enrolment pressures oblige most TU campuses to operate on three or even four shifts, limiting each instructional period to 35-40 minutes. The 130 affiliated private campuses of the university operate mainly in secondary schools on early morning or evening shifts, necessitating the reduction of teaching time from an hour per lecture to 30 minutes. The poor, sometimes dangerous state of facilities and equipment, contributes to staff dissatisfaction and student unrest.

Structural Problems

There are several major structural problems in Nepalese higher education. There are four levels of enrolment in higher education in Nepal. The first level is called "Lower level" which consists of students taking courses not leading to a certificate or a Bachelor degree. Only a very small proportion (less than 2 percent) of the higher education students are enrolled at this level. The second level is called "Certificate level". The successful completion of the two-year courses of study at this level leads to a "Proficiency Certificate". Since the Nepalese higher education system enrolls the secondary school graduates after 10 years of schooling, the Certificate level students are actually the Grade XI and Grade XII students of senior high schools. Thus the Proficiency Certificate is equivalent to a senior high school diploma in most of other countries. About 60 percent of students are enrolled at this level. The third level is called "Bachelor Level" which consists of students working on their Bachelor degree. Since the two-year courses of this level are enrolling students of Grade XIII and XIV, the Bachelor degree in Nepal is only equivalent to the associate degree of two year colleges in other countries. About 30 percent of students are enrolled at this level. The fourth level is called "Master level" programme which again is two-year academic programmes, taking in students towards a Master degree. Since students of this level are actually at their Grade XV and Grade XVI, the Master degree they earn is equivalent to a Bachelor degree in many other countries. About 8 percent of student are enrolled at this level. About 400 doctoral students are enrolled in Tribhuvan University. Since their number are very small and most of them are junior faculty members of the university, they are excluded from this analysis. The enrolment at the latter three levels has increased very rapidly in recent years.

Since 60 percent of the Tribhuvan University enrolment are the "Certificate level" students, they are at their Grade XI and Grade XII of learning and are actually senior high school students. Thus, a fundamental structural question must be raised: should these students stay in senior secondary school for two more years at a much lower public private unit cost, or should they be enrolled in the higher education system at much higher cost? According to a recent projection, by the year 2000, there could be 337200 students enrolled in the Nepalese higher education system, among which 238,000 are the Grade XI and Grade XII students, where they will be allocated in the education system will have a profound impact on the overall planning, financing and management of tertiary education in Nepal.

The increase of enrolment has been markedly skewed to the field of Humanities and Social Sciences, thus leading to an irrational structure in terms of subject composition in higher education. More than 80 percent of students are enrolled in Faculties of Humanities and Social Sciences, Management and Law and Institute of Science and Techonoly while less than 10 percent of students are enrolled in Institutes of Engineering, Agriculture, Forestry and Medicine, showing an absence of strategic planning for the labour force needs in the economy.

The expansion of higher education enrolment has continued to keep the traditional pattern of the under-representation of female students in the total student population. Women have accounted for less than 25 percent of the total enrolment. In

certain fields of study, such as sciences, engineering, agriculture and forestry, female students account for less than 15 percent.

Grades XI and XII Enrolment in the University

The problems of the university are compounded by the fact that about two-thirds of the undergraduate population do not properly belong to higher education and would be attending secondary school (Grades XI and XII) in most other countries. Their presence in the TU inflates the number of university students. Thus, the higher education enrolment ratio in Nepal (e.g., ratio of students enrolled in higher education vs. the higher education age cohort in the population exceeded five percent in 1991, which compared favorably with a median enrolment ratio for other lower-income countries of 3.7 percent. Without the younger students, however, the higher education enrolment ratio would drop to 1.95 percent. Furthermore, if this situation is allowed to persist, the proportion of Certificate Level students in the university will continue to grow.

As noted earlier, the most obvious consequence of higher-secondary education studies in the university has been the tremendous upsurge in enrolments in university. Perhaps the most problematic aspect of this system is the low quality of university education for them. The students themselves are less mature intellectually, less knowledgeable, and less ready for the challenges of tertiary education. It may be indicative of the low general level of expectations that faculty members lack advanced training: only 3.8 percent have doctorates, and 23 percent even lack a master's degree.

In 1989, the Government enacted a law to reassign the first two (Certificate) years of the university to secondary education, thus creating Grade XI and XII, and to expand undergraduate higher education by one year to three years. The total length of the educational system would then be 15 years. There would be financial and social advantages to this reform particularly if entrance examinations are introduced to control admissions. Long-term pressure on the country's education budget would be reduced; secondary education, which is under community and private control in Nepal, is managed more flexibly than university campuses, has much lower per capita costs, and has the potential to provide students with less costly but higher quality education.. Young students, would study under closer parental and school supervision. They would be more mature when leaving their home towns to attend the university. Since mobility and family investment for female students are often limited, more rural-area women would have access to higher levels of education. Implementation of higher secondary education (also called "10+2" or "+2") would affect nearly all university functions and policies. Students would be fewer and older; the crowded campuses would have space for courses of an additional year.

However, this reform requires curricular, financing, management, and planning preparation which has not yet taken place. Most secondary schools in the country are already crowded and apparently lack the facilities to house two more grades. The country's secondary level teachers are few, and the professors who teach Certificate Level students are usually tenured university employees. Although Certificate Level courses are mainly general (e.g., Nepali, English, Maths, Basic Science), some specialty courses are also taught at that level, such as constitutional law and

macroeconomics, at the very least, the order of the courses would have to be rearranged. It is expected to be cheaper to educate Certificate Level students in secondary schools in the long term, but considerable planning and investment will be needed in the short term. Investment and initial recurrent expenditures may be unacceptably high if new human and physical resources are developed solely for this level of education. If TU resources are reallocated to higher secondary education (e.g., buildings, professors, budget) political difficulties may arise. Wary of potential costs, MOEC plans to finance only the development of the programme and to leave funding for its actual implementation to communities. Accordingly, 36 schools opened Grades XI and XII in 1992, mainly in districts lacking university campuses. However, care will need to be taken in planning to avoid the formation of a parallel system to the university instead of absorbing Certificate Level students from existing campuses.

A semi-autonomous body of the MOEC, the Higher Secondary Education Board (HSEB) has been formed to introduce the reform, develop curricula, conduct examinations, certify students, and monitor the schools. Operating with limited resources and staff, it has been unable to plan for a phased transfer or to provide curricular leadership for Grades XI and XII. It is important that the Board be strengthened and that joint planning take place between MOEC and the university to develop: (a) an up-to-date curricular philosophy linking secondary and higher education; (b) valid and reliable examinations for the end of Grade XII and entrance to the university; (c) a reassignment strategy that would facilitate the introduction of a Three-Year Bachelor's degree and alleviate congestion at the university; and (d) a phased plan to prepare for the transfer of Grades XI and XII.

Quality Erosion

Outside the technical institutes, students are usually unable to specialize in a single subject. They must choose at least two that are offered by the same faculty (e.g., Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences). Although university syllabi list many subjects to choose from, the majority are offered in only one or two campuses. In most campuses, students actually have little if any choice. They may only take courses offered in a specific campus and during a specific shift and cannot develop a course of study that meets their professional goals. University majors and their content are not tailored to labour market needs.

The curricula for most courses, which are developed by the the Subject Committees in Kathmandu or Kirtipur, have not been updated regularly, some not since the early 1970s. All professors throughout the country must teach the same curriculum. Consequently, professors with advanced degrees and up-to-date knowledge are forced to teach outdated material for the sake of the uniformity required by the examinations system; thus, the centralized examinations system reinforces utilization of outdated curricula. Large-scale curricular updating is needed in all faculties if the university is to impart usable knowledge to students and to adjust to the Three-Year Bachelor's degree and implementation of higher secondary education.

Most university instruction nominally takes place in Nepali or English, and students are expected to own and be able to read textbooks. However, students (particularly poorer students outside Kathmandu) tend not to have textbooks because

books are: (a) not commercially available outside Kathmandu; (b) too expensive, particularly when more than one must be bought; (c) not helpful for the examinations, which ask for a few, concrete pieces of information to be memorised and reproduced in essay-type answers; and (d) sometimes incomprehensible. (They either do not contain sufficient explanations, or students may not know enough English to read them.) As a result, many students study from commercially or personally available notes and may only cover 50 pages of disjointed material in a one-year course.

The consequence of skyrocketing enrolments, few instructional inputs, lack of space, low level of financing, and centralized control is that relatively little teaching actually takes place. Many students find little appeal in attending courses offered at 6:30 a.m. in classrooms that are intolerably cold due to a lack of window panes. Examination questions are highly predictable, student notes of past years are available, and students may prefer to study at home and take the examinations or go to private coaching classes. In some respects, TU is a distance education institution that delivers low-quality and inefficiently managed education at very high cost.

Limited local authority, combined with Nepal's political past, has resulted in considerable student influence on the resources of the system and a distorted perception of student rights and responsibilities. Too often student expectations centre on unlimited access to the university's subsistence-related resources (cafeterias, dormitories, low tuition) rather than on instructional delivery. Without substantive authority to support the decision-making power they have, the campus chiefs feel forced to admit large numbers of students for whom they have no space. Encumbered by an administrative structure that discourages local initiative, TU administration has, until recently, been able to accomplish very little against professor and student interest groups both of which have lately become increasingly assertive, articulate and at times resistant to policy reforms and any institutional changes in the *status quo*.