

COMMUNICATION

Distance Education for In-service Teachers in Bhutan

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Abstract: *In this paper, the author discusses the distance education course for in-service primary teachers recently introduced at the National Institute of Education (NIE) in Samtse, Bhutan. It is the first and the only Distance Education Programme started in Bhutan. The regular and distance education teachers have same syllabus and appear for the same term-end examination. The distance learners attend compulsory residential contact programme. The distance education programme needs systematic planning and monitoring to impart knowledge and skills to the teachers. Developing teaching skills is a problem area needs to be looked into.*

Education in Bhutan

Modern education began in Bhutan in the early 1960s. Monastic education which still continues to be an important part of education in Bhutan was the only form of education till then. By 1995, the literacy rate was estimated to be 54 per cent and gross primary school enrolment rate was estimated to be 72 per cent. The following table gives a statistical overview of education in Bhutan at the moment.

Table 1 : Data on education in Bhutan

S.No.	Type of institution	Number	Students			Teachers			Pupil-teacher ratio
			Boys	Girls	Total	Nat*	NN*	Total	
1.	Community Schools	107	6,137	4,606	10,743	247	03	250	42.97
2.	Primary Schools	150	28,914	22,862	51,776	1,100	212	1,312	39.46
3.	Junior High Schools	25	9,571	8,336	17,907	368	105	473	37.86
4.	High Schools	13	4,889	3,639	8,528	208	108	316	26.99
5.	Private Schools	07	740	684	1,424	66	05	71	20.06
6.	Institutions	10	1,417	472	1,889	210	83	293	—
	Total	312	51,668	40,599	92,267	2,199	516	2,715	—

* Nat = National; NN = Non-national

(Source : *Education Division General Statistics*, June 1997)

Of the 2,715 teachers, only about 200 are estimated to have B.Ed. degrees, most of them teaching in the Junior High Schools, High Schools and institutions. Almost all primary teachers hold a Primary Teaching Certificate. Out of 2,199 national teachers, 501 are Zhungkha language teachers who are capable of teaching only Zhungkha, the national language. Rest of the subjects are taught in English, although in the first year of schooling the teaching of environmental studies in Zhungkha have recently been introduced in a move to promote the national language.

The educational structure consists of seven years primary school level including a year's pre-primary; four years secondary (two years of junior high school and two years of high school); two years' junior college; and three years' undergraduate programme.

Teacher Education in Bhutan

Teacher training started in Bhutan in 1968 with the establishment of Teacher Training Institute (TTI) in Samtse. Another institute was established at Paro in 1975. Both these institutes impart training to primary schools teachers. In 1985, TTI was upgraded to National Institute of Education (NIE) and started a B.Ed. degree course for secondary school teachers. NIE gradually expanded to offer a B.Ed course for secondary school teaching; B.Ed. course for primary teaching; and a Post-graduate Certificate in Education. The Teacher Training College in Paro has also recently introduced a training course for Zhungkha Language Teachers. A limited number of teachers, mostly in-service, are also trained abroad through scholarship aid programmes. The minimum qualification to undergo a primary teaching certificate course is a successful completion of class 10 or the secondary school level. Till 1985, candidates who only completed class 8 or the Junior High School level were also accepted.

In-service training mainly consists of short workshops and courses during vacation periods. They take place at various levels — national, Dzongkhag (district) and school level. These workshops mostly focus on curriculum innovations, development and their implementation.

Distance Education

Besides being very concerned with its commitments to Education for All, Bhutan also strongly believes in quality education which is dependent on the quality of its teachers. With the introduction of the New Approach to Primary Education (NAPE), the last decade has seen dramatic changes in the primary school curricula, bringing about a more child-centred, activity-based and context-relevant education. Teaching became extremely challenging to those teachers who completed their training before the introduction of NAPE. Therefore, a need for a formally accredited system of updating the primary teachers in addition to the frequent school, district and national level workshops and short courses was expressed through numerous fora. Further training through conventional systems would be very expensive and would also mean taking out teachers from schools when the need for them is rising every year. This led to the introduction of a distance education course at the NIE in December 1995. It is hoped

that this programme would not only be cost-effective, but also contribute to the sustainability of the new ideas and innovations. One of the drawbacks often expressed with regard to the short in-service courses was the lack of sustainability of the new ideas and innovations discussed. Ideas and innovations discussed and advocated during the short workshops and courses soon waned away due to the lack of a follow-up mechanism to implement and sustain them. Distance education, as it is a formal and accredited course requiring study as they worked, (drawing relationships between their work and study) would not only help sustain the new ideas and innovations but also generate them in the process.

Distance Teacher Education at NIE

The Course

The Distance Education is based on the B.Ed. (Primary) course that is offered conventionally and is designed for upgrading the teachers with a Primary Teaching Certificate. The distance education course for in-service teachers consists of a two-year Diploma in Primary Teaching, followed by a three-year B.Ed. degree in Primary Teaching. The course consists of the following components:

1. Professional Development Studies
 - Understanding the Learner
 - Learning Process
 - Teaching Skills
 - Teaching Strategy
 - Bhutanese Education System
 - School Curriculum
 - Education for Development
 - School Organization and Administration
2. Personal Development Studies
 - Dzongkha for Communication
 - English for Communication
 - Functional Mathematics
3. Elective Teaching Subjects
 - Any one teaching subject for specialization
4. Primary Curriculum Subjects
 - Teaching of English
 - Teaching of Mathematics
 - Teaching of EVS (Social Studies & Science)
5. Teaching Experience
(6 weeks of supervised teaching practice each year)

There are eight modules of 60 hours each to be completed every year for the Diploma; and 10 modules of roughly the same length as above for the B.Ed. course each year. This figures out to be two hours study time a day.

The Choice of Model and Rationale

The UNE's mixed-mode of distance education has specific characteristics as follows: "internal and external students are enrolled in the same courses and face exactly the same forms of assessment; academic staff have the control over the design and the teaching of courses; internal and external students are taught concurrently by the same staff; external students are required to attend compulsory vacation residential schools; the Department of External Studies (the Distance Education Unit in our case) administers enrolment of students, the provision of support services, the production and dispatch of teaching materials and the receipt and dispatch of student assignments" (Evans & Nation, 1989) — this was the obvious choice considering the nature of shortcomings that Bhutan faces. The main reasons for the choice of a mixed-mode distance education programme are :

- Bhutan cannot afford to take out teachers from the schools for full-time courses for further training and education, because of the acute shortage of teachers in the schools.
- The existing resources, both human and material can be utilized rather than making further investments to establish a full-time course.
- Teachers under training can put into practice with immediate effect whatever they learn, thus contributing to the quality of teaching in schools.
- It can strengthen the internal course by providing feedback based on field practice.

Objectives

The objectives of the distance education courses are to:

- provide opportunities for the participants to express, reflect and share their experiences as classroom practitioners;
- develop a liking and commitment to child-centred teaching rather than syllabus teaching;
- create an awareness that changes in teacher attitude and teacher readiness precede changes in education;
- help them review critically the relevant literature on education and apply in their profession; and
- ensure the study of relevant literature on how children grow and develop, and apply the knowledge thus acquired in their daily work.

Modes of Delivery

The course was to be delivered in two ways :

1. Compulsory residential periods of four weeks every year to attend orientation programmes and lecture sessions; discuss and write assignments; collect study materials; and discuss other issues related to their course work.

- Using mail services to send course materials (mainly print backed by video and audio tapes); and send and receive assignments. Printed materials generally consist of a *study guide* and a *resource pack*, that include reading materials of varying types and schools of thought, where they exist. In certain cases, it is also accompanied by visuals and audio-tapes.

Evaluation and Accreditation

The course is evaluated through a series of assignments assessed using a pre-determined criteria. For every assignment completed, the respective tutors give a detailed feedback to the candidates.

There will be two types of award of certificates:

- A Diploma on successful completion of the initial two years' course.
- Bachelor of Education degree on successful completion of another three years' course. Candidates will be allowed one additional year to complete the courses upon request.

In order to obtain the above certificate/degree, a candidate must fulfil the following criteria:

- A candidate must do all the assignments indicated in the respective modules by the tutors and submit them within the due date.
- A candidate must obtain at least 'D' grade, i.e. the passing grade in each assignment.
- A candidate must complete 30 modules successfully (10 modules each year) in the three years' course for award of the degree.
- If a candidate is unsuccessful, he/she will be allowed to re-do the module(s) that he/she failed in, at his/her own expenses.
- A candidate must attend one month residential school each year regularly until the course is completed.

Material Development

The course materials which are mainly in print are designed by tutors who also teach the internal courses. The modules taught conventionally are redesigned into self-instructional materials. The course materials for the Degree is being developed while the course materials for the Diploma are already in use. The course materials that are under use so far are to be reviewed very soon for their effectiveness and to be revised. Only a limited number of copies are printed each year considering the number of the students. It will however be mass produced once the number of students increase and the first review and revision are complete. All module writers have a sound knowledge of curriculum and textbook design, and most of them have undergone short courses on Self-Instructional Material Design at Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi, India. However, there is a need for improvement especially in technical areas like layout design, use of visuals, and media.

Problems Faced and Challenges Ahead

Although in the beginning it was hoped that a small number of students, with high motivation, would in certain ways ensure a high rate of success, there were lessons to be learnt due to lack of basic resources, foresight and technical expertise in planning the distance programme.

The need for additional staffing has seriously curbed the progress of the Distance Education Programme at the NIE. All the module tutors are full time internal teachers teaching a minimum of 20 periods of 40 minutes every week besides myriad other curricular and co-curricular responsibilities. The immediate responsibilities at the institute took priority over the distance programme in many a case.

The students also found themselves engulfed in commitments from different sides — their job, the distance study and family commitments. Many of them were working in school situations where there were teacher shortages.

Apart from the study materials, the residential school and the feedback to their assignments, there is no system whereby we could monitor the course and render any other support services. The learners were all on their own and in a sense isolated as many of them worked in remote schools with no one qualified or supportive enough to discuss their distance course work. Because of tight schedules of work at the institute, visiting schools to observe and supervise their practice in the schools became impossible. Their teaching practice assessment had to be mainly based on the micro-teachings during the residential school and assignments. These issues need to be addressed to for effective teaching-learning at a distance.

Reference

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