

The Educational Relationship between Bhutan and Australia

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Abstract

Education has been the central pillar of friendship and cooperation between Australia and Bhutan for more than five decades. Formal diplomatic relations between the two countries started in September 2002 and since then, areas of collaboration have diversified to agriculture, trade, water, energy and connectivity as well as support for Non-Government Organisations and volunteer programs. Enduringly, education remains the core basis of the friendship and cooperation between the two countries since the first cohort of five Bhutanese students were admitted at Hale School in Western Australia under the Colombo Plan in 1969. This article provides a comprehensive foregrounding of the bilateral areas of educational cooperation, enduring and productive partnerships between the two countries. This historical account of the relationship in education between the two countries of Bhutan and Australia is based on a range of information sources gathered from government websites, unpublished reports from universities, press releases, and peer reviewed book chapters and journal articles. The culmination of this report identifies a need for an empirical investigation of the personal and professional outcomes of this relationship.

Key words: *Bhutan, Australia, collaboration, education, scholarships*

Introduction

Since 2005, close to 7,000 Bhutanese students have graduated from Australian institutions (Department of Home Affairs (DHA), 2019) and Australia has been the preferred English-speaking destination for higher education for decades. As an integral part of the Royal Government's long-term human resource development programme in critical areas and to meet the growing demand of Bhutan's fast-growing economy, Bhutanese students are sent to Australia for higher education annually (Department of Adult and Higher Education (DAHE), 2019a). Bhutanese students' access to higher education in Australia has been on the rise especially in the last five years and is expected to grow as Australia stands in a strategic position to grasp opportunities from the Asian century and continues to stand as the most favoured destination for international education (Department of Defence (DOF), 2012). In return, Australian students visit Bhutan under the New Colombo Plan initiative of the Australian Government to encourage young Australian students to study in Asian countries, representing now a two-way flow of students and 'lift knowledge' of the Indo-pacific within the citizens

(Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), 2019b).

Bhutan's Educational Journey

Bhutan chose to live in the state of self-imposed isolation for centuries, until opening her door to modernization with the first five-year plan of 1961 (Planning Commission (PC), 1999). Prior to the start of the first plan, there were about 400 students and around 45 teachers in 11 schools throughout Bhutan (Powdyel, 2005). Realising the need to develop human resources to expand much-needed socio-economic development, western education in Bhutan progressed specifically from 1962. Father William Mackey, a Canadian Jesuit priest was invited to Bhutan to start a school in the far east of Bhutan, using the English language as the medium of instruction. Accordingly, Fr. Mackey started Trashigang High School in 1962 from where the first batch of students graduated in 1969 (Dorji, 2016). From these humble beginnings of modern education, with a few schools and students in the 1960s, Bhutan today has 512 schools and 167,000 children who are taught by over 9,000 teachers (Ministry of Education (MoE), 2018).

As the number of schools and students grew and the demand for higher education rose, some schools were upgraded, and new colleges were established. Trashigang High School, which was upgraded to Sherubtse College, began providing undergraduate tertiary programs in 1983 under the auspices of Delhi University of India (Schofield, 2016). In the same year, the first Bachelor of Education (B. Ed) programme was also introduced at the National Institute of Education (NIE) in Samtse. Indeed, secular tertiary education in Bhutan is relatively new.

In line with the global higher education system and to incorporate and direct the colleges and institutes previously functioning under different ministries, the Royal University of Bhutan (RUB) was established in 2003 under the Royal Charter (Royal University of Bhutan (RUB), 2019). In addition to catering for undergraduate programs, Paro College of Education and Samtse College of Education which are constituent colleges under RUB offers Master degrees in education. The College of Natural Resources started the Master of Science in Natural Resources Management and Master in Development Practice in 2014 (College of Natural Resources (CNR), 2019). Gaeddu College of Business Studies offers a Master of Business Administration (MBA) program. The Royal Institute of Management, an independent institution, also offers a Master of Business Administration (MBA) in collaboration with the University of Canberra in Australia (Schofield, 2016) and some postgraduate diplomastudies. Except for the limited programs mentioned above, tertiary institutes so far have not been able to offer master's level courses across all areas of need, and the limited offerings have impacted on the availability of student placements within the country.

The second independent Bhutanese university, the Khesar Gyalpo University of Medical Sciences of Bhutan (KGUMSB) was officially launched in 2015 under an act of Parliament. KGUMSB offers few bachelor degrees and diplomas in paramedics besides offering limited Doctor of Medicine (M.D.) courses as a residency program (Khesar Gyalpo University of Medical Sciences of Bhutan (KGUMSB), 2019). In addition, the university plans to start a Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery degree (MBBS) for offer in 2022. Further, three private colleges; Royal Thimphu College, Norbuling Rigter College and Reldri Academy of Health Sciences which are operational currently provide undergraduate programs.

Notwithstanding, the increasing number of tertiary institutions in the recent past has not only given many Bhutanese students access to higher education but also contributed to much needed human resource requirement of the country. Currently, there are 19 Tertiary Education Institutes (TEI) offering various courses to 11,311 students (Gross National Happiness Commission (GHC), 2019). However, owing to limited places for study, government scholarships and choice of programs available in the colleges within Bhutan, access to higher education is limited to less than half of the students graduating high school annually (Department of Adult and Higher Education (DAHE), 2018b). The other half of graduating students, in order to gain access to higher education, have to travel abroad. Further, at least 10% of the students drop out of the system due to various reasons.

Bhutan's educational relationship with Australia

As Bhutanese tertiary education is in its infancy, with limited student placements, high school students, university graduates and many in-service people have to travel abroad for further studies. India has been hosting the maximum number of Bhutanese students especially at the undergraduate level owing to the geographical proximity, lower cost and other conveniences. Notwithstanding, Australia has been the preferred destination for higher education since 1969 when the first batch of five Bhutanese students from Trashigang High School were accepted at Hale School in Western Australia (Australia Awards (AA), 2019).

The journey of friendship between Australia and Bhutan started much earlier and Australia has been, from the beginning, unconditionally supporting human resources development which is the backbone of modern Bhutan (Dorji, 2016). In October 1962, Ashi Tashi Cheudzom Dorji, the Grand Aunt of His Majesty the Fifth King represented Bhutan as an observer at the 14th Colombo Plan Consultative Committee Meeting held in Melbourne. With support through the

then Senator John Grey Gorton who later became the 19th Prime Minister of Australia, helped Bhutan gain early membership to the Colombo Plan (Australian High Commission (AHC), 2017) and this membership eventually led Bhutan's entry into the United Nations in 1971.

With the entry into the Colombo Plan as a member nation, Bhutan not only achieved access to much needed socio-economic assistance, but also helped reveal to the world the existence of a small Himalayan Sovereign Kingdom of Bhutan. Furthermore, the Colombo Plan laid the foundation for relations between the two countries. Australia announced its first gift to Bhutan in August 1963, four-wheel drive trucks along with spare parts valued at £65,000 followed by awarding of scholarships to five Bhutanese students to study in Australia under the Colombo Plan. This event is important as it began the journey of educational partnership, support and assistance between Bhutan and Australia. Notable among the first group of students who came to Australia was the first Vice-Chancellor of the Royal University of Bhutan; Dasho Dr. Pema Thinley.

Formal diplomatic relations between the two countries was established in September 2002 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), 2019). In recognition to fostering Australia-Bhutan relations particularly in the education sector, the ambassador of Australia to Bhutan, Harinder Sidhu, on behalf of the Australian government, awarded the insignia of Honorary Officer within the General Division of the Order of Australia to Ashi Tashi Cheudzom Dorji in July 2018 ("Australia Confers", 2018). Further, the two countries celebrated 15 years of diplomatic relations and more than five decades of informal educational collaboration and friendship in 2018.

From the very beginning of capacity building initiatives in the 1960s, Bhutan has turned towards Australia for training of skilled and knowledgeable professionals across the critical areas of need. As a result of continued support received, around 50% of RUB's current faculty members have Australian qualifications. Furthermore, amongst the 29,000 civil servants currently working, more than 2,000 employees at the professional category have an Australian degree (Royal Civil Service Commission (RCSC), 2019). In addition, hundreds of Bhutanese students are currently studying at various tertiary institutions. Australia, for over five decades has unconditionally supported Bhutan in the field of education and is evident from the important projects and programs initiated so far. As suggested earlier, Bhutan's educational relationship with Australia is an outcome of cautious decisions, considering future human resource development opportunities amongst many other factors. Some of the notable initiatives that has impacted life of individuals and country are identifiable in terms of: resources committed (financial, capacity building, soft diplomacy) and tertiary institutional collaborations.

In terms of the resources committed, the financial supports can be identified through a range of sources including: the Australia Awards, Australian tertiary institutional scholarships, RGoB scholarships as well as many students fund themselves to study in Australia.

Australia Awards

Government of Australia has been investing a huge amount in education and training of emerging leaders and professionals from developing countries for over five decades by forming effective partnerships with national governments in the Asia-Pacific region (Cassity, 2010). It is a prestigious international scholarship offered by the government of Australia. The budget for 2019-2020 alone is \$305 million hosting 3,161 individuals from 55 different countries and the total expenditure for the award is consistent above \$300 million annually over the past decade (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), 2019c). The total grant under the Australian Official Development Assistance (ODA) to Bhutan alone in 2019-2020 is estimated at \$6.4 million (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), 2019d).

The objective of awarding scholarships and fellowships is to develop capacity of individuals, build people-to-people linkages and to return home to contribute to the socio-economic development of home countries (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), 2019c). Bhutan has been a recipient country with more than 600 students since 2007 who have been beneficiaries of the Australia Awards initiative (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), 2019d). Several Bhutanese students have also studied in Australia under the Colombo Plan, prior to reframing the country's aid policy in 2006 with the adoption of the White Paper (Henry et al., 2012).

Similarly, in order to contribute to the deep and lasting ties between Australia and partner countries, the Australian government has been supporting domestic students to study in the region under the New Colombo Plan. Until 2018 December, 208 Australian students have visited Bhutan under the New Colombo Plan (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), 2019b).

Education has always been the flagship program of Australia's overseas aid initiative as it is viewed critically to delivering benefits in nation building, health, governance, productivity and gender equality resulting in achieving Millennium Development Goals (Henry et al., 2012). Politically, Australia, as a nation is viewed as a neutral country not only by Asia but also Africa and other aid recipient countries (Amazan, Negin, Howie, & Wood, 2016). For Bhutan, one of

the main priorities of the relationship is strengthening institutional capacity of tertiary institutes and Royal Institute of Management (RIM), a leading tertiary institute in Bhutan has been a recipient of the support program. Postgraduate study courses in public and business administration at the Royal Institute of Management have been established with the support of Australia's development initiative. Under the development cooperation, assistance has also been provided for Technical and Vocational Education and Training sector (TVET) to address youth unemployment and trade skill shortages. A two-year project to build capacity in Bhutan's TVET sector commenced in 2019 and scholarships for diploma studies were also started beginning 2020 academic session.

Australia's support to Bhutan has diversified in the recent past to agriculture, trade, water, energy and connectivity as well as support for NGO and volunteer programs. The support has also been extended to school feeding programs under the global development program (World Food Programme- WFP) and has provided regular funding under the partnership (Australian High Commission (AHC), 2017). In addition, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed on 15 May 2012 between Australia and Bhutan to formalise the launching of a volunteer program in Bhutan by the Government of Australia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), 2019). The volunteers are focused especially in the fields of health and education, including special education, in Bhutan. Notably, diversification of support programs and development cooperation is evidence of Australian willingness to render continued support to Bhutan and strengthen bilateral relations to the next level. As Bhutan and Australia celebrated 15 years of successful diplomatic relations, the people of two countries must also rejoice the five decades of relationship in the field of education.

Australian tertiary institutional scholarships

Notable amongst Australian universities that has educated Bhutanese students and also made significant contributions to Bhutan's education system since late 1990s is the University of New England (UNE). UNE has a long-standing linkage with Bhutan through Dr Barry Harley, a 1960-1961 Bathurst Teachers' College and later a UNE Master of Educational Administration graduate, who became a faculty member at the Armidale Teachers' College during the 1960s (School of Education, University of New England (UNE), 2019). As per the vision of Dr Harley, Dr Jim Irvine, since 1991 through UNICEF, has helped Bhutan to establish small community schools, train young Bhutanese teachers in curriculum design, teaching pedagogy and monitoring besides many other important assignments. With the professional support of UNE, Bhutanese educators were admitted in mixed-mode study and the program was designed for senior Bhutanese educators to continue working full-time in Bhutan while undertaking UNE

courses which included mandatory residence at UNE for at least one month per year. The university's education faculty members such as Dr David Laird and Dr Tom Maxwell played key roles in the early days of the 'mixed mode studies' programme, and the associated attachment to local schools, and made support visits to Bhutan on several occasions (School of Education, University of New England (UNE), 2008). It should be noted that the schools attachment programme was hailed within the South Asia Region as a unique approach to observing and rewarding commitment of teachers serving in isolated and difficult schooling situations. Their significant contributions to UNE- Bhutan links extended to other important areas of support during the past 30 years.

One of the important projects implemented by UNE was the Bhutan Multigrade Attachment Program (BMAP). Multigrade teaching was chosen by the Ministry of Education in Bhutan as an urgent and strategic move to teach children in rural areas where it is not feasible to create full primary schools and the distances were too long to get all the children to existing schools (Maxwell, 2001). During this critical time, UNE, with support from the regional schools in Armidale, New South Wales came forward to help Bhutan in training Bhutanese teachers and school leaders in multigrade teaching. As highlighted in a BMAP report submitted to Ministry of Education from 1993 to 2008, there has been significant student learning and professional development in the classrooms of the educators involved in BMAP program and a wider range of teachers have benefitted through the professional development activities initiated by BMAP participants. BMAP is a successful story and provides strong evidence of undisputed educational partnership and collaboration between MoE, Bhutan and UNE. UNE faculty members such as Dr Tom Maxwell, Dr David Laird, Dr Warren Halloway and Dr Peter Ninnes have played a very important role in making the program effective and beneficial to Bhutanese schools for more than a decade, and Bhutan owes the deepest gratitude to these pioneers. The outcome of this project was that the university advised and trained 155 multigrade teachers under the BMAP program that started in 1993 and formally ended in 2008 (School of Education, University of New England (UNE), 2008).

UNE has been actively participating in the educational journey of Bhutan in the last three decades and the collaboration and friendship has not ended. Another commendable educational relationship worth highlighting between UNE and Bhutan is the capacity building in research. UNE so far, has awarded 18 PhD degrees to Bhutanese scholars which is the highest amongst all universities around the world (University of New England (UNE), 2019). The university also awarded an honorary doctorate to the first Vice Chancellor of the Royal University of Bhutan, Dasho Pema Thinley. Further, UNE has trained 35 undergraduate students in technical and professional field including urban and regional planning and awarded 40 master's degree in

various programs (School of Education, University of New England (UNE), 2019). There are nine current PhD students and one scheduled to join for 2020 academic session, mostly on UNE HDR scholarships who will soon add to the doctoral cohort in Bhutan. With the increasing number of PhD graduates, research capacity especially within RUB is expected to become stronger.

Since the inauguration of the Royal University of Bhutan (RUB) in 2003, UNE has continued its involvement especially with the two colleges of education. UNE was involved in developing a Diploma programme in Early Childhood Education through the expertise of Dr Margaret Brooks and Dr Robin Jones. Tertiary study for inclusive education in Bhutan, which is still in its infancy stage, is being restructured with support from Dr Jeanette Berman. Dr John Haynes and Dr Judith Miller are supporting two colleges of education in designing Diploma curriculum in Sport Coaching and Administration. In addition, UNE has helped in drafting a RUB higher degree research (HDR) pathway, policy and associated procedures for Royal Education Council (REC), INSET projects, reviewed Bachelor of Education (Primary) in distance education mode in-service program besides many other commendable joint projects initiated (School of Education, University of New England (UNE), 2019). The RUB Centre for University Learning and Teaching (CULT) was established in 2008 to improve learning and teaching at the Royal University of Bhutan (RUB). The Project was directed by Dr. Tom Maxwell with Ms Jennifer Reid as research assistant and Ms Deki Gyamtso and Mr Kinzang Dorji were the in-country associates. These developments highlight the opportunity to continue to grow the joint research publications between UNE academics and those from the two colleges of education in Bhutan.

Queensland University of Technology (QUT) has also a longstanding relationship with Bhutan and has been supporting human resource development for many years. The university, through Australia Awards has supported Bhutan in building capacity of the country's first Family Bench to deal with cases of violence involving child abuse (Queensland University of Technology (QUT), 2018). University of Canberra (UC) in collaboration with Royal Institute of Management (RIM) is offering a joint UC-RIM Master of Business Administration (MBA) program which is first of its kind in Bhutan (University of Canberra (UC), 2018). RUB has also signed Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with several Australian universities including Edith Cowan University (ECU) in Western Australia (Lhamo, 2018) and UNE to foster collaboration in student and faculty exchange, capacity building and joint research.

Universities from all other states in Australia have also either hosted Bhutanese students, initiated joint projects or organised study trips to Bhutan under the New Colombo Plan initiative

which is evidence of new levels of educational access and relationship between the people of the two countries. Currently, tertiary institutes in Canberra, Queensland and Western Australia are hosting maximum Bhutanese students owing to various factors including free access to education for dependents and better part-time job opportunities. As the internationalization of Australian education continues to expand with the growth of global educational mobility (Hayden & McIntosh, 2018), Bhutanese students' access to higher education in Australia will continue to rise and is expected to double in the coming years.

Royal Government of Bhutan (RGoB) Scholarships

As an integral part of the Royal Government's long-term human resource development programme in critical areas and to meet the growing demands of Bhutan's fast-growing economy, various ex-country scholarships in both professional and generic fields are implemented annually (Department of Adult and Higher Education (DAHE, 2019a). The Royal Civil Service Commission deals with in-service training of civil servants and the Department of Adult and Higher Education under the Ministry of Education is mandated to look after the training of pre-service candidates. These two government agencies have been collaborating and building linkage with Australian educational institutes to place students for higher studies. Non-governmental organizations, corporations, autonomous agencies and private sector agencies have also been working with Australian tertiary institutes for training of their employees. As a result, hundreds of graduates trained in Australian universities are currently working in various technical and professional fields in Bhutan and are contributing to socio-economic development of the country. Some of the technical programs such as Bachelor of Urban and Regional Planning were recently implemented for the first time and are expected to contribute to systematic planning of infrastructure development in extended cities and new district towns across the country. Besides building academic proficiency, educational experience and exposure to language and culture has helped our teachers at both school and tertiary institutions to teach international best practices to our young children and teacher trainees who have had very less exposure to the western world.

Self-funding

Access to tertiary education in Australia is not only limited to sponsored students. In fact, large numbers of students on self-funding have already found a place to study in Australia's multicultural institutions. As of November 2018, ongoing Bhutanese student numbers has increased to over 2000 (Australian High Commission (AHC), 2017) and by June 2020, the number is expected double largely comprising students who are self-funded. Considering the

size of population in Bhutan, having more than four thousand students in Australia is a huge number by any standard. With better access to financial institutions in Bhutan for student loans, improved living standards, a greater number of students completing undergraduate programs, friendlier Australian immigration regulations, proximity to home country, better quality of education, job opportunities and other progressive factors, the student number is expected to grow even higher in the coming years.

Undoubtedly, the movement of students in large numbers has helped strengthen people-to-people contact, to portray Bhutan's cultural identity in a multi-cultural environment, to learn best practices and a working culture that contributes to encouraging civic disciplines upon returning to Bhutan and to gain skills and knowledge that is instrumental in the country's socio-economic development. The inter-movement of students between the two nations is an evidence of undisputed educational relationship which is expected to grow in the years to come.

Outcome of the Educational Relationship

The outcome of international education is visible in this globalized world. Undisputedly, globalization has become a core connecting phenomenon in all aspects, no matter which continent you are located, or how small a country is (Hirst, Thompson, & Bromley, 2015). Movement of goods and services between countries and regions has become inevitable in this era and education is no exception. Consequently, globalization in education is so rampant that even educational policies in many countries are influenced significantly (Lauder, Brown, Dillabough, & Halsey, 2006). Student movement across the regions is on the rise and countries such as United States, United Kingdom, China, Australia, Canada and France are top host destinations for international students. For various reasons, such as better education, job prospects, the desire to discover new life in a foreign land, or a combination of these reasons, millions of students travel across the globe every year (Baas, 2006). For Australia, education is the third largest service export, a soft diplomacy and an important source of revenue (Sawir, 2005).

International education includes the movement of books, ideas or persons across borders and represents cultural, educational or intellectual relationships of groups from different countries (Fraser & Brickman, 1968). It also involves mobility of faculty, students or institutions across the frontiers (Laifer & Kitchen, 2017). However, some argue that international education is about learning ideologies from different perspectives and not necessarily taking on the views of one single host country (Hayden & Thompson, 1995). Whatever it may be, internationalization of education in English speaking countries has attracted thousands of

students into these countries every year and Australia currently has close to a million international students (Department of Education & Training, 2018). For Bhutanese students, getting the opportunity to study abroad is a lifetime experience and an eye-opening journey that must have an impact on each of them, their families and on the Bhutan itself.

Even students from developed countries agree that studying abroad is an important part of their academic achievement and personal growth. In a study conducted by the International Education of Students (IES) to over 3,400 American students who studied abroad between 1950 to 1999, it was reported that the participants were benefitting immensely from the academic and intercultural implications of an educational experience abroad (Dwyer, 2004). As a result of study abroad, students have been increasingly getting jobs in international and multinational organizations in addition to student's personal, intercultural and social growth. The study abroad has also led to long-lasting friendships with countrymen and impacts on current relationships (Dwyer & Peters, 2004). Such positive experiences are consistent with a similar study where Saudi Shiites and Sunni students, while studying in the United States have had much greater level of interaction and cooperation in contrast to their religious rivals back home (Hall, 2013). This is one example of the positive engagement and powerful impact of study abroad.

Several studies are also consistent in their findings on the expected outcome of study abroad. Chinese and Asian students pursue postgraduate studies abroad as the enhanced qualification and foreign degree will give them added advantage over other students who have had no additional qualifications from abroad. In a study on the impact of western education on future Chinese Asian managers, participants agreed that western qualifications gave them a competitive advantage at home along with improved opportunities. The participants also shared that the additional degree would provide career mobility and enable them to go into a different field when they returned home (Curtis & Lu, 2004). Interestingly, many returning Bhutanese doctorates lost their seniority in service due to study abroad (Maxwell, 2019). Notwithstanding, overall opportunities are expected to be better with enhanced knowledge, skills and qualifications.

From the economic perspective, education is the third largest service export for Australia (Sawir, 2005). Since the commencement of the Colombo Plan for Co-operative Economic Development in South and Southeast Asia in 1950s, international education has not only been a soft diplomacy but also Australia's biggest services export earner, contributing over \$17.1 billion in 2014-2015, \$ 20.3 billion in 2015-2016 and \$ 34 billion in 2017-2018 to Gross Domestic

Product (Universities Australia (UA), 2016).

Bhutan, however, should be viewed from a different perspective as it definitely is insignificant in terms of the international student market. The Australian Government and the educational institutions continue to provide access to Bhutanese students under a range of scholarship schemes due to the longstanding relationship between the two countries. The government of Australia has so far awarded scholarships to over 600 students under the Australia Awards scholarship program besides many students sponsored by each of the tertiary institutions (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), 2019d).

Bhutan too has started hosting international students, mostly from Australia and United States. As part of the international education program, students from other countries such as Japan, India, Switzerland, Thailand, Poland and Canada are being hosted in Bhutan (Royal University of Bhutan (RUB), 2017). By December 2018, 208 Australian students including students from the University of New England, Edith Cowen University, University of Canberra, University of Technology Sydney, and Queensland University of Technology have had the opportunity to study in Bhutan under the Australian Government's New Colombo Plan Scholarship scheme. For this particular initiative, Australia's former Foreign Minister Julie Bishop has clearly stated to the New Colombo Plan scholarship recipients that the nation has relied upon the friendship and connections that Colombo Plan scholars would make and people-to-people relationships that are nurtured (Minister for Foreign Affairs (MFA), 2016). It is evident, from this statement that education plays a critical role in building friendship amongst nations and that from an Australian perspective, internationalization of education is a potential source and expression of soft power especially in Indo-Pacific region (Laifer & Kitchen, 2017).

Laifer (2017) asserts that the idea behind such programs is to encourage international students to experience multicultural values and diversity of Australia and build a strong international network and relationship with the scholars who have the potential to rise to influential positions over the years. For instance, some of the current Bhutanese government ministers, senior bureaucrats and several executives are alumnus of Australian tertiary institutions and this is exactly what is desired. It fulfils Australia's education strategy as these leaders understand more about Australia and has potential to create conditions for greater educational, cultural and economic exchange and cooperation between the two countries (Wyeth, 2018). But what is it doing to Bhutan?

Bhutan has a population of 681,720 persons (National Statistics Bureau of Bhutan (NSB), 2018), and has hundreds of students and their dependents returning from abroad annually. Bhutanese students' access to tertiary education in Australia has been on a consistent rise over five decades and the nature of educational relationship between educational institutes and organizations of Bhutan and Australia is exemplary. Australia has not only given access to Bhutanese students to experience international education but also sends their own students to Bhutan to learn best practices, experience pristine environment, rich ecology, undiluted culture and education system.

Conclusion

Irrespective of policy initiatives, five decades of educational collaboration between Bhutan and Australia is a successful story and will be cherished in the history of the educational journey of Bhutan. Australia's contribution in building strong foundations of education, both in school and tertiary level in Bhutan is commendable. Further, as hundreds of Bhutanese students flock to Australia, people-to-people contact, friendship and connections are going to grow from strength to strength and continue to fulfil the aspirations of both the countries. What is of vital interest is how the personal and professional lives of the Bhutanese scholars are impacted by this living and studying opportunity in Australia, and what difference this makes when they return to educate young Bhutanese in this complex, global world. There appears to be no known published studies on this topic available. Therefore, these questions are currently forming the basis of an empirical study to understand the implications of the educational relationship between Bhutan and Australia.

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