



Swiss study says otherwise

Contrary to conventional wisdom, study says no decline

13 July, 2009 - In what may be at variance to several studies that say the quality of Bhutanese education is on the decline, a new study concludes that the quality of basic education (classes PP-X) has improved despite factors that hamper the implementation of high quality education.

The study, carried out by Helvetas, a Swiss non-governmental organisation, states that clear or realistic benchmarks did not exist for reports, which conclude that the quality of education has deteriorated. The Helvetas study was based on quantitative and qualitative results from the start of Swiss educational contributions in 1989.

The report, looking into the qualifications of teachers in the past 15 years, says that teaching in primary and secondary schools has potentially improved. More than 50 percent of an almost 6,000 teaching force has either a bachelor's degree or higher. The availability of additional training, at the colleges of education in Paro and Samtse, also provides teachers today with more avenues to upgrade qualifications.

The study found that teacher-educators at these colleges were "self- confident" and this, more critically, enabled them to further develop teacher education themselves. In 2008, 599 pre-service teachers were enrolled at these colleges.

On the motivation or "morale" of Bhutanese teachers, which the report describes as an extremely controversial and emotional issue in Bhutan, the report points out that teachers are motivated, despite other studies concluding differently. The report says teachers today have a more "thorough theoretical knowledge of new teaching and learning concepts."

Enhancement of quality of syllabus, curricula, textbooks and school libraries also contributed to the improvement.

Teacher to student ratio was also continuously decreasing with the last one calculated at 1:28 in 2007. The education ministry aims to achieve a ratio of 1:24. Accessibility and availability of primary and secondary education in Bhutan had also increased in the past 15 years. The report points out that enrolment in basic education (PP-X) had increased by 84,861 students between 1993 and 2008, an increase of 137 percent.

At the same time, repetition and dropout rates were also decreasing. In 1995, more than 14 percent of pupils repeated a class, while in 2008 this rate had decreased to 6 percent. The report states that, since 2001, the dropout rate has been decreasing. Other studies have pointed out that boys usually dropped out to join monastic schools while girls to help at home.

The Helvetas study also found that another major reason for dropping out was the difficulty pupils faced to reach school. It was found that, in rural areas, every fourth child had to walk more than an hour to school. Academic performance was reduced the longer the distance to school.

The study also found that practical vocational relevance of secondary education in Bhutan was and is still low. The report says the contribution to vocational skills development of graduates and to the overall vocational relevance of secondary education is minimal.

The author of the report, Professor (Dr) Priska Sieber says, "Several recent studies and reports on education in Bhutan focused on the shortcomings in education, although education has achieved huge positive developments in the last decades." Only stressing what needs to be improved may discourage

shareholders in education, she says. Motivation to engage for education can be kept up by acknowledging achievements.

Dr Sieber also questions the use of benchmarks such as Finland to measure the quality of education in Bhutan. She says educational systems of other countries should instead serve as inspiration rather than models to replicate.

She also suggests that schools produce more than academic achievement in languages and mathematics. By only measuring cognitive development, she says, wholesome education may not be achieved.

By Gyalsten K Dorji