

BHUTAN'S CASE OF WAVING CUT-OFF POINT FOR CLASS X PASSED PROSPECTS FOR ADMISSION IN CLASS XI AND ITS MERITS: A POLICY PERSPECTIVE!

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Abstract

This article intends to share the perspectives of Bhutan's recent policy reform of waving off cut-off point for class X passed graduates for admission in class XI and its merits. Against the backdrop of concerns shared on declining quality of education, to bring about equitable access to secondary education, and transitional issues of school to job market, this policy change was introduced in 2019. This paper briefly outlines the background on the 'cutoff point', merits of extending a year of schooling, how it benefits girls education, the general implications on the growth of technical and vocational institutes if it's scope is not reviewed and scaled up. With cross references to international trends, highlights on how it will help building much needed human capital for the country.

Keywords: Policy, Education, Bhutan, Admission, Cut-off

Education, globally, is considered the cornerstone for any human and economic development. Human development in Bhutan's context, considering its geopolitical situation, is critical to address the current challenges and gear towards country's prosperity of realizing Gross National Happiness, particularly in view of Bhutan graduating from the list of Least Developed Countries (LDC) to middle income country from 2023. Quality education thus is an inevitable tool for any development both as a means to an end and end in itself. Thus, going by the current trends, education stakeholders share a genuine concern on education policy changes. Such as the recent case of doing away with the 'cutoff point' for grade X passed graduates to continue their education in grade XI beginning 2019 academic session, thereby enrolling all class X graduates in grade XI in both public and private schools on scholarships. This paper attempts to clarify the intent, purpose and the benefits of this initiative in the long run.

The cut-off point

Education system has been evolving ever since it first started with several changes to improve access, equity, efficiency to meet the national priorities, emerging challenges and at the same time to maintain the global standards. Such reforms are often made through policy changes and are handled efficiently by professionals at various levels. The case of doing away with the cutoff point in 2019 is not an exception. The concept of cutoff point came along with the increasing number of students at the terminal examinations which were earlier conducted at grade VI, VIII, and X against the number of seats in those schools that offers the next higher grade. The candidates who passed the examinations and have not met the admission cutoff in next higher grade are given 'pass for training certificates'¹ to give an option to join the technical and vocational education programmes to address the human resource and skills required, or welcomed

¹ 8th Quarterly Policy Guidelines and Instructions, 1992, Department of Education, Ministry of Social Services

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to reappear the respective examinations during the subsequent years. Students who could not attain the cutoff point are also allowed to pursue their studies even through a number of private schools that offers higher secondary education. Thus, the concept of cutoff point is not entirely to screen students as most people assume about it or check the quality of education, but to give preference in public schools based on merit, and creating alternative choice and pathways based on individual competencies.

The benefits of additional year of schooling

There is no doubt that increasing the years of schooling has significant benefits. Firstly, from the human capital front, education is an investment of current resources in exchange for future returns. It maximizes the expected present value in the form of future returns. The study conducted in this area globally has estimated that the returns to a year of schooling are between 7% - 9% in UK (Harmon, Oosterbeek, & Walker, 2000), 12 % in Denmark (Bingley & Kristensen, 2014), 17% in Philippines (Patrinos & Al-Samarrai, 2016), 8-13 percent increase in hourly earnings in US (Card, 1999), and has shown a global average of about 10% (Patrinos, 2016). The returns to education however tend to vary based on the country, region, or level of schooling as presented in the figure-1. Generally, the Social and private returns are highest in low and middle income countries as shown in figure-2.

Table 1 - Average returns to schooling by region (%)

Region	Total	Male	Female
Sub-Saharan Africa	12.5	11.3	14.6
High income economies	10.0	9.5	11.1
Latin America & Caribbean	9.3	8.9	10.8
East Asia & Pacific	9.0	8.8	9.7
Europe & Central Asia	7.8	7.4	9.8
South Asia	7.2	6.3	9.2
Meddle East & North Africa	6.5	6.0	10.2
All economies	9.7	9.1	11.5

Note: The numbers represent the rate of return, as a percentage increase in earnings, to another year of schooling. It is a private rate of return, in the sense that the only costs controlled for are the opportunity costs of not working while in school.

Source: (Montenegro & Patrinos, 2014)

Table 2 - Returns to Investment in Education by Level, Latest Year, Averages by per capita Income Group (Percentage)

Per Capita Income Group	Mean Per Capita (US\$)	Social			Private		
		Primary	Secondary	Higher	Primary	Secondary	Higher
High Income (\$9,266 or more)	22,530	13.4	10.3	9.5	25.6	12.2	12.4
Low Income (\$755 or less)	363	21.3	15.7	11.2	25.8	19.9	26.0
Middle Income (\$9,625)	2,996	18.8	12.9	11.3	27.4	18.0	19.3
World	7,669	18.9	13.1	10.8	26.6	17.0	19.0

Source: (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2012)

A similar study by Montenegro & Patrinos (2002) also indicates that while the returns are highest at the primary education level, there are significant returns even at secondary and higher secondary levels. The overall returns are higher for women as compared with men with 9.8% and 8.7% respectively as presented in figure-2.

Table 3 - Returns to Education by gender (%)

Educational Level	Men	Women
Primary	20.1	12.8
Secondary	13.9	18.4
Higher	11.0	10.8
Overall	8.7	9.8

In addition to the direct returns, there are also other non-monetary gains as a result of additional year of schooling that we should count on more given our development philosophy of Gross National Happiness. Studies globally supports that individuals gain additional knowledge and understanding, and subject skills in an established institutional environment with close guidance and supervision from the learned faculties in contrast to their free time in the hunt for employment opportunities. While in schools, the individuals also mature to gain the better view of the environment so that they are able to make better decisions about their career, health, marriage and parenting, and are less likely to engage in risky behaviors thereby reducing the criminal behaviors while scaling up the productivity (Kolesnikova, 2010). It also increases of the changes of individuals accessing higher education. This syncs with the vision and aspirations of student outcomes of strengthening the nine ‘students attributes’ as aspired in the Bhutan Education Blueprint 2014-2024 (Ministry of Education, 2014). In short, the experiences and skills acquired in school reverberate throughout individuals’ life.

How doing away with cutoff point benefits our context

As the intent of the cutoff is not to measure the quality of education or screen students out, doing away with it is a noble and bold initiative given the scale of resources required. Cutoff point itself is not good for many affected and unfortunate individuals who could not outperform the cutoff point in the last grade X examinations. Nonetheless, cutoff point also opened up an opportunity for low academically performing students with a certification to seek employment opportunities, or continue their education in private schools. Systems and mechanisms such as establishment of Technical Training Institutes (TTIs) and private schools has been created to support those students who could not secure the cutoff marks. As of 2018, there are six TTIs and 20 private schools that offers higher secondary education. Efforts has also been made to increase the intake in public education system² increasing the intake from 30% in 2001 to 40% followed by setting the minimum intake to 40% from 2008, that enabled system to absorb a high as 52% in 2014.

While the policy approach has been noble by creating education pathways in vocational trades where the country requires its skilled workforce more, it could not keep up with its standards to meet the market demands with technology fast setting in against the limited resources in these institutes. The only consequence was that technical and vocational trades could never live up to its name resulting in declining demand from school graduates. Going by the initial modality of training in such institutes for more than two year of diploma, the graduates would have the knowledge, skills and the age

² 20th Education Policy Guidelines and Instructions, 2001, Education Department, Ministry of Health and Education

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to enter into labour market. With recent phenomena of graduates accessing the labor market directly after the basic education, in the weak or absence of school to work transition preparation, they didn't meet the minimum age of 18 as per the provisions in Labour and Employment Act of Bhutan 2007.

Thus, doing away of the 'cutoff point' is beneficial by many fold except that the government will have to bear the additional cost. Going by the trend, and several anecdotal cases, children from parents who are either economically disadvantaged, rural areas, uneducated, or have to walk long distances to primary schools generally perform weak in the high stake examinations conducted at higher grades. This initiative supports and helps those children to continue their higher secondary education who otherwise are edged out of the system not necessarily by performance in examination but by affordability in private schools. Going little deeper, this initiative also benefits girls students to continue their higher secondary education. Considering the trend of proportion of students pursuing higher secondary in private schools over the last 10 years by gender, about 4% to 12% more girls study in study in the private schools with their own financing as compared to boys although the gap is getting reduced significantly (Policy and Planning Division, Ministry of Education, 2018). Even in the case of 2018 class X passed, there are more number of girls who avail the scholarship, who otherwise will have to share the cost of their education. This this initiative helps to narrow the gap in a practical sense.

While the share of family's investment in their children's education is important for various reasons, it should not be at the cost of their family's affordability that might risk losing the family's existing status and survival if not build onto it. Families any way do share the cost of education in supporting the provision of teaching learning materials, uniforms, transportation, and children's participation in schools instead of assisting parents in doing work at home.

The message from the golden throne has clearly indicated that the future of our country lies in the hands of our youth. The government of today has prioritized in capitalizing on this, while other competing areas has made progressive achievements over the last decades which otherwise stands in claiming the larger share of scarce resource. Bhutan has over 24% of its population in schools around the country, investment in their education is one of the certain ways to have a multiplier effect to social wellbeing and country's economic development in the long run. The investment in education particular takes an almost over one and half decades to see a change, and reforms has to be strategic and supported appropriately. In any case of investment, there is a fair degree of risk attached to it. For the programme to succeed and to have a domino effect, it has to be supported by additional programmes, mechanisms and financing at various key stages including the support from parents, community, local government, and stakeholders. It also merits revisiting the curriculum content and its delivery, assessment mechanisms and feedback system in order for students to progress into next higher grade with a desired learning outcomes. This if not checked will develop systemic complacency and will ultimately deteriorate achieving students learning outcome as students' progress from one grade to another negating all the efforts and achievements

made so far, and impacting negatively on the quality of education in the foreseeable future.

Following the trends in countries where they achieved ‘economic miracles’, the countries transformed education system into a potentially significant instrument of development, and to sustain heavy investments, it is important to have consistent support of economic, demographic, political, and culture (Tilak, 2002). Given Bhutan’s current advantages, it is important to capitalize and build a human capital by investing in our children’s education to have a lasting benefit for the individual, family, community, and the nation at large. The investment such as this, is indeed one of the bold initiatives for the better future.

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