

Proposed Higher Education Policy

Introduction

Nepal needs a Higher Education Policy (HEP) that can address the current challenges of the higher education (HE) sector in the country.¹ In April 2014, the University Grants Commission (UGC) submitted a draft of the proposed HEP to the Ministry of Education (MOE) of the Government of Nepal (GON) for further action. This policy was formulated after a long exercise coordinated by the UGC to further develop, manage and regulate existing and future higher education institutions (HEIs) in Nepal.² In its Annual Policy and Programs for the fiscal year 2014-15 presented on 29 June 2014, the GON has also mentioned that the HEP would be formulated and executed to manage HE in the country.³ Hence the initiative taken by the UGC to formulate the proposed HEP is to be commended.

The Policy Formation Process

In 2012, the UGC formed a 22-person committee headed by its then chair Dr. Ganesh Man Gurung to prepare the draft HEP. Five thematic task groups were formed, each with six members on themes such as (1) 'redirecting thrust for development and innovation in higher education;' (2) 'establishing and strengthening universities/higher education institutions;' (3) 'regulating and monitoring foreign affiliated institutions in Nepal;' (4) 'quality assurance in higher education;' and (5) 'financing in higher education.'⁴ The first collective meeting of these groups took place in August 2012. Each of these groups then reviewed documents and consulted with relevant experts and other individuals before preparing thematic policy drafts. During the first half of 2013, the UGC organized several consultative seminars in all five development regions of the country. The five task groups each prepared a thematic policy draft. Those drafts became the basis for a synthesized HEP draft prepared by a eight-person core committee that consisted of the then



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¹ Revised and abridged translation of 'Prastavit Uchcha Shiksha Niti,' Policy Review Brief No. 13, Martin Chautari (MC); available at www.martinchautari.org.np/files/PolicyReviewBrief13-ProposedHigherEducationPolicy.pdf

² See, University Grants Commission (UGC). 2071 v.s. Uchcha Shiksha Nitiko Prastavana. Unpublished ms. Available at www.ugcnepal.edu.np/news/proposed-national-hi-3924; accessed 4 June 2015.

³ See, GON. 2071 v.s. *Samvidhansabbhako Vjyasthapika Samsadko Vaitbhakma Sammananija Rastrapati Dr. Ramvaran Yadanyudvara Prastut Arthik Varsha 2071/72 ko Nepal Sarkarko Niti tatha Karyakram*. P. 10. Kathmandu: GON.

⁴ See, UGC. 2071 v.s. Uchcha Shiksha Nitiko Prastavana. P. 4.



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UGC chair, then UGC member-secretary, the five coordinators of the task groups and one administrative officer of the UGC. This HEP draft was presented in a national seminar organized in Kathmandu on 14 August 2013. A revised complete draft of the HEP in Nepali and English, with the title 'Higher Education Policy Framework' was available by early October 2013. It was submitted to the Ministry of Education in April 2014.

After some minor revisions, the ministry submitted the HEP draft to its Education Policy Committee (EPC) in late September 2014. The EPC meeting was held on 29 September 2014 and it seems to have recommended some minor revisions before approving it. A revised version of it was presented to all the members of the National Planning Commission on 2 December 2014. Thereafter, the draft was submitted to the national cabinet in late March 2015. The cabinet meeting held just a few days before the devastating earthquake of 25 April, chaired by the then acting Prime Minister Mr. Bamdev Gautam, discussed it. Since Mr. Gautam decided that he needed more time to go through the document carefully before approving it, the cabinet did not make a decision on that occasion.⁵ The earthquake that hit mid-Nepal just a few days later meant that the cabinet has had to pay attention to issues related to post-quake relief, recovery and reconstruction (not to mention the writing of the new constitution which remains the main show for the ruling politicians) since then. The cabinet decision on the HEP, it seems, has been put on hold.

During the period when the HEP draft was being formulated by the UGC and subsequently, it is unfortunate that there has not been much of a larger public discussion about the proposed HEP in Nepal's traditional big media and the new social media platforms. HE is a major public concern and any substantial changes in its policy domain should be deliberated publicly and extensively. Martin Chautari researchers have read the draft HEP prepared by the UGC and the slightly revised draft that the Ministry of Education forwarded to its EPC. We have not seen the further revised draft submitted for approval by the national cabinet but have been told that it is not very different from the draft prepared by the MOE and sent to its EPC.⁶ In this commentary, we have focused on

only some of the aspects of the proposed HEP: the governance of HE; its expansion and equitable access; research and financial investments.⁷

The Governance of Higher Education

The proposed HEP focuses on the external governance of HEIs and is mostly silent on issues related to their internal governance. The creation of many mechanisms to externally govern HE will further centralize the governance of HEIs in Nepal. If the proposed HEP is implemented, at least 10 central level commissions, boards and committees will be formed. First, the HEP has proposed to upgrade the existing UGC into a Higher Education Commission "to take up expanded responsibilities of higher education development, coordination and monitoring." The enhanced UGC will encompass several institutional set-ups including:

- i. "A national board of higher education for comprehensive planning, implementation monitoring, higher education development and also regulating affiliation of higher education institutions.
- ii. Higher education funding board will be developed for comprehensive financial policy decision and management, regulating government funding support as well as to regulating private and community funding in higher education sector.
- iii. Student financial assistance fund development board strengthened to expand the provision and to sustain the system.
- iv. University coordination committee strengthened to promote culture of self and mutual regulation and monitoring.
- v. National board for course equivalence, mutual recognition of degrees and credit transfer."⁸

Second, the HEP proposes to establish a separate 'high level unit' in the MOE "to promote innovation and development of higher education to make it more effective and focused to national issues and priorities." Third, it proposes to establish a Quality Assurance and Accreditation Board as an autonomous

⁵ MC interviews with officials at the Prime Minister's Office; May 2014.

⁶ MC interviews with officials at the Ministry of Education; May 2014.

⁷ Between June and December 2014, MC organized seven interaction programs on the proposed HEP in Kathmandu, Pokhara, Biratnagar, Birganj, Kanchanpur and Surkhet. This brief also incorporates some of the views expressed by participants in those programs.

⁸ UGC. 2071 v.s. Uchcha Shiksha Nitiko Prastavana. P. 26.



and independent body separate from the universities and the UGC. Fourth, the HEP proposes to establish a Higher Education Research Council “to promote research and innovation activities” and to “link national research needs with the institutions of higher education on competitive basis.” Fifth, it also proposes to form a National Commission of Higher Education Services “to facilitate objective and competitive faculty recruitment.” Hence the proposed HEP is ambitious in the realm of establishing new institutions and re-structuring some existing ones.

Why the UGC needs to be enhanced into a Higher Education Commission (HEC) is not specified in the proposed HEP. If this has been influenced by similar moves in other countries in South Asia, it has to be noted that the enhancement of the UGC in India proposed in 2011 was retracted in September 2014.⁹ Such an enhancement carried out in Pakistan in 2002 has met with many criticisms since and the new body has not been able to adequately address the problems of higher education in that country.¹⁰ Since the HEP does not provide details, it is not clear what the mutual roles of the proposed HEC will be vis-à-vis the proposed ‘high level unit’ in the MOE. Given the tendency towards dominance exercised by Nepal’s bureaucrats in the past and given their hold on the allocation of public resources to bodies such as the proposed HEC or the existing UGC, it is likely that the unit established in the MOE will overwhelmingly control HEC and strangle the independence of universities and other institutions related to HE in Nepal.

The proposed creation of all the other national boards and centralized institutions mentioned above suggests that the state is not interested in a decentralized governance regime for HE in Nepal. At a time when it is almost certain that the Nepali state will become a federal one with a certain number of provinces as per the proposed new constitution of the country, it is not clear why so many and new centralized entities are needed to govern and regulate HE. In addition, the HEP does not provide details on the rights and responsibilities of

these entities, nor does it state how their work will be more effective than the current modalities in place.

The separate laws through which Nepal’s universities have been established provide for a ‘university service commission’ in each university through which it recruits its faculty members. This provision is considered an integral aspect of the institutional autonomy of each university. The HEP proposes to form a National Commission of Higher Education Services (modeled after the national Civil Service Commission).¹¹ Such a centralized commission for the recruitment of faculty members who will serve in Nepal’s various universities will undermine the autonomy of the universities.¹² What any university wants to offer in terms of formal degrees and courses and what kinds of research centers it wants to host/embed within itself determine the variety, subject-specialty and thematic orientation of its faculty. Far from an administrative decision, faculty recruitment is a core academic exercise that has a direct implication on the academic mission, character, orientation and independence of the universities. They should be able to recruit faculty members to suit their mission and goals. Out-sourcing of faculty recruitment to a centralized external commission will surely make university governance more complicated.¹³

The internal governance of Nepal’s universities has been weakened by the interventions of the political parties in their affairs. The nomination of individuals to top managerial positions in all the universities along party lines (N. *bhagbanda*) has produced debilitating consequences for the internal governance of the universities. In addition, the unionization of faculty members, students and administrative employees along party lines has further contributed to the weakening of the academic environment at Nepal’s universities. In such a situation, the creation of external centralized mechanisms as discussed above is hardly helpful. If

¹¹ UGC. 2071 v.s. Uchcha Shiksha Nitiko Prastavana. P. 27.

¹² There is however differences of opinions amongst Nepal’s educationists on this issue. See, e.g., Wagle, Mana Prasad. 2070 v.s. Uchcha Shikshaka Nitigat Mudda. *Kantipur*, 12 Bhadau, p. 7.; Gurung, Ganesh Man. 2071 v.s. Uchcha Shikshaka Sat Samasya. *Kantipur*, 3 Asoj, p. 7. and Manandhar, Tri Ratna. 2071 v.s. Uchcha Shiksha Niti ra Ain: Ek Vivechana. Unpublished report, MC.

¹³ In the draft of the new constitution, the proposed Federal Civil Service Commission will have the authority to recruit faculty members for state-supported universities. See, Uprety, Devendra and Pratyoush Onta. 2072 v.s. Vivima Kendrikrit Seva Ayog. *Nagarik*, 10 Bhadau, p. 7.

⁹ See, www.telegraphindia.com/1140926/jsp/nation/story_18874464.jsp#.VCj84FcxFS0; and www.newindianexpress.com/editorials/Come-up-With-Foolproof-Higher-Education-Bill/2014/09/27/article2451030.ecc; accessed 25 November 2014.

¹⁰ See, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/477192/10-years-of-hec-a-revolution-in-education-or-misplaced-priorities/>; accessed 15 August 2015.

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mechanisms that enhance internal governance within the universities could be developed, they stand a better chance to reduce the problems facing higher education in Nepal. For this, practices of horizontal accountability in most aspects of the academic enterprise are very necessary. Part of the solution will also come from rethinking the affiliation mode of university growth in Nepal whereby instead of large independent colleges seeking an affiliation with a specific university, the former should be encouraged to become universities in their own right.

Expansion of Higher Education and Equitable Access

Demand for HE has been increasing steadily in Nepal. The gross enrollment rate in HE for the year 2006/07 was 6.6 percent. It has increased to 17.1 percent by 2012/13.¹⁴ About 89 percent of the total student enrolment in HE in Nepal is in the fields of ‘general education’ (humanities, social sciences, management, and education faculties) and about 10 percent is in the fields of ‘technical education’ (science and technology, medicine, engineering, etc.). In the proposed HEP, it is mentioned that the state will prioritize the establishment and growth of HEIs that offer market-based and professional degrees in fields such as medicine, engineering, information technology, forestry, agriculture, biodiversity, renewable energy, etc. The HEP does not say how the state will help such HEIs nor does it specify how the student enrolment figure can be reduced in general education and increased in technical education.

It is generally acknowledged that there are more problems in the fields of general education in Nepal than in fields related to technical education. For instance, the pass rate for students in general education is much lower than that for technical education. Students are much more frequently absent in the classrooms and routine classes are more frequently disrupted in general education than in technical education. The proposed HEP is mostly silent on what needs to be done to tackle the problems besetting the disciplines in general education. Hence even if the proposed HEP is executed, it is certain that the problems faced by disciplines in the

humanities, social sciences, management and education will not be alleviated.

HE expansion in Nepal is uneven in terms of its geographic and regional spread. Access to HEIs is also uneven in terms of gender, caste and *janajati* identities and the ability of families to pay for the education of their wards.¹⁵ Amongst the market-based technical and professional higher education fields prioritized in the proposed HEP, the private sector has invested heavily in fields such as medicine, engineering and management. Colleges which offer these professional subjects often charge huge fees to their students, making these fields financially out of bound to students who come from low or lower middle class family backgrounds.

The proposed HEP does discuss the need for equitable participation in HE for members of those communities that have been traditionally underrepresented in this sector. The HEP draft says that ‘special measures’ will be taken to ensure the equitable participation of all in HE. In particular, it states that scholarship programs, concessionary loans and self-savings can be used to increase the access to HE of students from such communities.¹⁶ Since the details have not been mentioned in the HEP, just how these schemes might be implemented is left unclear. Past experiences have shown that various types of challenges exist in launching and sustaining such programs.

Research

As in other countries, research centers have been operating in Nepal in universities, under state-owned entities and in the non-governmental sector. The former two rely on state support for their funding whereas non-governmental research centers have, for the most part, raised their own funds to finance their research activities. The proposed HEP states that “study centers/institutions of international standards will be developed” according to the country’s unique potentials, opportunities and needs.” In particular it mentions that some six centers devoted to studies on mountaineering and tourism, biodiversity and sustainable use, water

¹⁴ UGC. 2014. *Education Management Information System: Report on Higher Education 2012/13 (2069/70) Nepal*. Pp. 32–33. Sanothimi: UGC.

¹⁵ See, Bhatta, Pramod, Lila Adhikari, Manu Thada, and Ramesh Rai. 2008. Structures of Denial: Student Representation in Nepal’s Higher Education. *Studies in Nepali History and Society* 13(2): 235–263; Sijapati, Bandita. 2005. Perils of Higher Education Reform in Nepal. *Journal of Development and Social Transformation* 2: 25–33.

¹⁶ UGC. 2071 v.s. Uchcha Shiksha Nitiko Prastavana. Pp. 22–23.



resources, ecological balance and natural environment, natural disasters and their management, and national heritage and indigenous knowledge will be opened.¹⁷ It is not clear if these new research centers are to be opened as independent institutions or as entities embedded in the related ministries of the GON or within the various existing universities. In any case, what their relationship will be to the GON is not discussed. Nor is the case made why these particular themes have been chosen as opposed to other equally important ones. Given the penchant of the HEP to open new institutions, it is not surprising that such new centers for research have been proposed without asking the question if the existing research centers within the universities (e.g., CEDA, CNAS, RECAST and CERID in Tribhuvan University) or within the realms of the various ministries of the GON could be re-structured to carry out specific research in these themes. Similarly, the possibility of engaging already existing and capable academic Nepali NGOs for the same purpose is also not discussed. For the best use of the public money, it would make sense to limit the overall number of research institutions supported by the state but fund and staff them adequately so that they can carry out their remit for research effectively.

With respect to the proposed Higher Education Research Council (HERC),¹⁸ it is again not clear what its role will be with respect to already existing bodies such as the Nepal Health Research Council and the Nepal Agriculture Research Council. Moreover, the HEP does not state how this Council will be different from the much discussed and proposed Social Science Research Council (SSRC) for which the GON formed a Strategic Plan Development Team in 2012. Following the submission of the latter's final report in spring 2014, a group of bureaucrats has been working to 'finalize' the GON's view on the proposed SSRC.¹⁹ Since there will be significant overlaps between the proposed HERC and SSRC, it would be prudent to not establish two separate councils of the same nature.

Inadequate Investment

The proposed HEP has stated that the proportion of the total annual education budget of Nepal that goes to the HE sector should be increased from the current about 8 percent to 10 over the course of four years. According to the HEP, this increase needs to be made to build infrastructure, develop educational technology and improve human resources in the higher education institutions in Nepal including universities, their institutions, departments and campuses.²⁰ Given the technical orientation of the HEP, what this increase will amount to in terms of results that will be realized after four years is left unstated. In fact the percentage increase advocated (from 8 to 10 percent of the total annual education budget) seems completely arbitrary and only based on the realization that any significant increase in public investments in HE in Nepal is unlikely at this moment.²¹ It is entirely possible that this budget increase will be used to finance the new centralized mechanisms proposed by the HEP which has been discussed above.

The HEP is silent on how the investments necessary to enhance the physical infrastructure of the new public universities will be found. The proposed policy does recognize the hybrid nature of the growth of HE in Nepal whereby public universities supported by the state provide affiliations to privately operated private or community colleges. Here it states, "In order to promote public-private partnership government should support private institutions, for which it will prepare a framework of criteria required for such support including transparency, continuity, financial resource mobilization and quality management, and provision of student scholarships."²² The exact manner in which this support will be extended to private institutions is left unstated. Will it come in the form of annual block grants to the private institutions or will it come in the form of grants to be distributed to students from communities traditionally underrepresented in the HE sector in Nepal? It is anybody's guess.

As noted earlier, the private sector has invested heavily in HE institutions that provide degrees in medicine, engineering and management, often thought as market-

¹⁷ UGC. 2071 v.s. Uchcha Shiksha Nitiko Prastavana. P. 10.

¹⁸ UGC. 2071 v.s. Uchcha Shiksha Nitiko Prastavana. P. 7, 26.

¹⁹ See, Social Science Research Ad hoc Council. 2014. *Strategic Plan for the Proposed Social Science Research Council in Nepal*. Kathmandu: Social Science Research Ad hoc Council, Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare (MWCSW), GON. MC interview with a MWCSW official; August 2015.

²⁰ UGC. 2071 v.s. Uchcha Shiksha Nitiko Prastavana. P. 24.

²¹ In fact the education budget as a percentage of the total annual budget has been decreasing gradually. From around 16 percent in 2009-10, it had decreased to 14 percent by 2014-15.

²² UGC. 2071 v.s. Uchcha Shiksha Nitiko Prastavana. P. 24.



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based subjects. This has also been the experience of other South Asian countries including India. Disciplines in the humanities and the social sciences are not, broadly speaking, market-based subjects and hence the private sector is unlikely to invest in HEIs that offer degrees in these subjects. If these disciplines are important for the training of a critical public then it is obvious that the state needs to invest in them in the public universities. Alternatively it could provide incentives to private or community based HEIs to run programs in general education.

Conclusion

When evaluating any policy of the state, it is important to ask if the concerned policy is able to tackle the major problems in the related sector. The proposed HEP has not been able to provide solid guidelines to address the major problems of HE in Nepal. As has been stated above, the main governance challenge of HEIs is an

internal one but the HEP recommends the creation of many new centralized external governing entities. Top-down controlling mechanisms run by central level bureaucrats cannot improve the internal governance of HEIs. As is well-known, most students are enrolled in general education in Nepal but the HEP has prioritized technical and professional education and has little to say about the challenges facing general education. In a hybrid HE system with many private operators offering formal college degrees affiliated to various universities, the HEP does not specify details on what the state should to promote public-private partnerships beyond the level of slogans. Since details on most themes mentioned in the HEP are either missing or remain to be figured out, it would be fair to say that the proposed HEP is a document of intentions but one that does not lay out the various possibilities to really inform policy choices on HE in Nepal.

