

Positioning Bhutan through thought and innovative education

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Historically, Bhutan's journey from a medieval kingdom to a modern democracy was rooted in the social, cultural and religious values, visionary leadership and education. Under the farsighted leadership of the Bodhisatva Kings, Bhutan continued to develop as a Kingdom of peace, prosperity, and happiness. However, with globalisation, it was natural that Bhutan's integration and interactions with international affairs had its influence on the development paradigm. As countries worldwide confront rapid technological change and greater complexity in global interdependence, the evolving realities are continually presenting the grounds to make up and catch up with the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century. Although the development philosophy of Bhutan is anchored in the teachings of Buddhism and Gross National Happiness (GNH), Bhutan also faces the imperative to keep pace with the rapidly changing world order. (Gross National Happiness Commission, 2021; Bencsik, 2024).

Today, Bhutan stands at a transformative crossroad. Notwithstanding its timeless values of interdependence, unity, and mutual harmony, along with the principles of compassion and indigenous wisdom, the nation is deeply engaged in navigating the tides of internationalisation, technological advancements, demographic change, and environmental challenges. To further secure ground as a peaceful, progressive, and sovereign state, the forward momentum launched by recent policy reforms under His Majesty, King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck's vision, centred on the economy, bureaucracy, education, and the development of the Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC), is on its path to redefining Bhutan (The Bhutanese, 2021; Kuensel, 2021 and Bhutan Broadcasting Service, 2023)

Education remains a central pillar in national development for Bhutan. With a modest beginning from a monastic form of education to the modernising into the current state, the purposes and expectations of education have undergone a profound transformation in the past decades (Rai, 2025; Turner and Wangchuk, 2025). As societies are increasingly tasked with preparing learners for technological advancements, artificial

intelligence, global competitiveness, lifelong learning, and socio-emotional resilience, Bhutan's development trajectory positions education not merely as a tool for socio-economic growth but as a vehicle for cultivating ethical, compassionate, and enlightened citizens.

However, Bhutan also faces challenges typical of developing systems. While the country has made commendable progress in preserving its culture, protecting the environment, and maintaining political stability, it is increasingly confronted with multifaceted challenges spanning economic vulnerabilities, food security, demography, youth unemployment, environmental threats, governance issues, migration, and the complex balancing act between tradition and modernity (van Gelderen, 2023; Dorji and Hosoe, 2025). Additionally, as the pressure triggered by information flow, digital media, and social mobility across borders mounts on the cultural identity and values, the aspirations, and lifestyles of the Bhutanese, especially the youth, are also changing. While these changes offer new opportunities, they also risk diluting the historical awareness and cultural consciousness. Therefore, governance and institutional capacity need to evolve to meet emerging challenges. As Bhutan transitions into a more vibrant democracy, there is a growing demand for greater innovation, efficiency, and public participation in policymaking and policy delivery. Strengthening institutions, promoting civic engagement, and ensuring policy innovation have emerged as critical for long-term development (Wangdi and Boossabong, 2024).

Lodged at a crossroads, Bhutan must skilfully navigate a range of domestic and global challenges. While the nation's visionary leadership under His Majesty the King, provides a solid compass, contemplation and innovative educational dialogues will only stand to leverage that the national objectives are materialised. Under the Royal Vision of a knowledge-based society, as the government engages in the national transformative initiatives to foster an agile, efficient, and innovation-driven public-private sector, the emphasis on enlightened entrepreneurial bureaucracy aims to align national governance with productivity, performance, and accountability, marking a significant shift from the traditional model. The special national undertaking of

Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC) as a special administrative region unveiled by His Majesty the King is an innovative urban development project that integrates economic growth with mindfulness, holistic living and sustainability (Poudel, 2025). Because of its strategic location at the intersection of major economic regions, including South Asia, ASEAN and China, plans for this innovative hub will position Bhutan as a global leader in mindful and sustainable urban growth. With the primacy of focus on green technology, compassion and reflection, GMC is designed to be a consciously developed landscape within the framework of sustainability, spiritualism, ethical governance and Bhutanese identity (Jackson, 2024).

Data science and generative AI offer Bhutan a powerful toolkit to enhance its education system and make policymaking more intelligent, responsive, and people-centred. As a policy direction, there is ample emphasis on digital transformation strategies and education reforms to embrace science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) as an innovative solution to the emerging skill gaps. However, education for AI, machine learning, and data science, along with prioritising human dignity, community vitality, and environmental sustainability, is yet to be institutionalised (Lhamo, 2025). Therefore, there is potential to pursue data science and AI education with caution, inclusivity, and foresight. By embedding ethical safeguards and aligning technological innovation with national values, Bhutan can emerge as a model of how small nations can responsibly embrace digital futures rooted in happiness and harmony.

Bhutan's future growth depends on its ability to nurture an innovation-driven economy while maintaining cultural values. As education is at the heart of progressive nation-building, nurturing a culture of academic curiosity and civic participation among the Bhutanese populace empowers them to become active contributors to Bhutan's democratic and economic future. Additionally, as progressive societies thrive on collaboration across people, disciplines and sectors, the cross-pollination of ideas, ideologies and practices among multidisciplinary backgrounds can illuminate a unified framework (Bano, 2025). This integrated approach serves the local requirements of producing high-value evidence-based policy and practice solutions to Bhutan's developmental challenges and positions its unique narratives as a thought leader in sustainable development and mindful governance to global audiences.

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