

Advancing Bhutan's education

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Bhutan is at a pivotal crossroads in its development journey. The country has graduated from the Least Developed Country status to a developing country status in 2023 and is exposed to considerable challenges and opportunities. Barely recuperating from the economic damages caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and having to brace with the rapidly evolving regional and global socio-political and economic landscapes, Bhutan has more complexities in its transformation journey (United Nations, 2022). The establishment of the Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC) under the visionary stewardship of His Majesty The King as a futuristic independent city, and an economic and spiritual hub wrapped in Bhutanese culture, is designed as a cradle for growth and innovation within the nexus of spirituality and sustainability (Jackson, 2024). To this effect, His Majesty has also called for an enlightened entrepreneurial bureaucracy to not only support the realisation of the GMC but also to continuously build a knowledge-driven, resilient and forward-looking citizens (Levi, 2026). These transitions need to be reinforced by the transformation of the human capital and the national consciousness. At the heart of it is education.

The world into which the younger generations are entering is vastly different from that of the previous generations. Artificial intelligence, automation, climate uncertainty, geopolitical disruptions, digital economies, and rapidly changing labour markets are redefining the nature of work, citizenship, leadership, and human interactions. Traditional educational models based on structured programs and standardised conformity are increasingly becoming irrelevant to the evolving times and circumstances. As a tool for social engineering, Bhutan's education needs to address the requirements of the younger generations while providing them platforms to exhibit their skills and competencies enabling them to lead successful lives and contribute meaningfully to nation-building. Thus, innovative education must be the key for Bhutan, and it needs to be understood as cultivating curiosity, creativity, adaptability, emotional intelligence, ethical leadership, and systems thinking (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2018). Innovative education is not only about preparing citizens for gainful employment, but for meaningful participation in society.

Bhutan possesses a unique advantage in this transformation. The development philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH), which prioritises holistic wellbeing, provides an extraordinary opportunity to adapt an education system that balances innovation with humanity, technological advancement with moral wisdom, cultural identity, and economic ambition. His Majesty The King has consistently commanded for an

education system of the highest standards to address the physical, emotional, psychological, intellectual and moral make of the students and provide quality education with an equal emphasis on the local and trans local knowledge, skills and values (The Bhutanese, 2021). This means that the future of education needs to be understood as sharpening the intellectual quotient along with nurturing youngsters with the socio-emotional and ethical skills (Manyukhina, 2025). Our younger generations must, therefore, embody global competencies while remaining deeply grounded in the Bhutanese ideals of tsa-wa-sum, tha damtshig and driglam choesum (Wangdi and Boossabong, 2024).

Therefore, education must no longer operate in isolation from the realities of society, industry, governance, and the environment. Instead, learning ecosystems must become interdisciplinary, experiential, collaborative, and problem-solving oriented. This transformation demands a reimagining of educational institutions. Educational establishments need to be shaped as centres of innovation, introspection, and transformation. They need to be chiselled as centres of humanistic engineering and incubators of ideas, entrepreneurship, and technological adaptation.

To achieve this mission, the role of educators needs to be transformed as well. Educators today are no longer mere transmitters of knowledge. They need to evolve as mentors, facilitators, ethical guides, and intellectual catalysts. Therefore, professional empowerment of educators must remain central to Bhutan's national transformation agenda. The educational reinvention requires strategic leadership, institutional agility, investment in research and innovation, stronger partnerships between academia and industry, international collaboration, and policies that encourage creativity and efficiency rather than bureaucratic rigidity. It also requires us to create pathways where young people can see meaningful futures within Bhutan itself, thereby addressing growing concerns surrounding youth migration and talent drain. Importantly, innovative education must also be inclusive and equitable. We need to have policies that provide equal opportunities to rural learners, differently abled students, economically disadvantaged and less privileged communities. Policies need to be innovative, inclusive and equitable as education continues to remain a powerful equaliser that provides opportunities for growth and bridges disparities across regions and social groups.

As Bhutan looks to the future, the development of the Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC) presents an unprecedented opportunity for the younger generation to contribute meaningfully to nation-building. To prepare them for this sacred responsibility,

we must nurture imagination, innovation, and adaptability. Our education system, therefore, must be equally adaptive, multidimensional, and future-ready—one that empowers learners to continuously learn, unlearn, and reinvent themselves in a rapidly changing world.

Under the visionary and compassionate leadership of our enlightened Monarchs, Bhutan has its charted a unique development path rooted in the Buddhist values of interdependence, harmony and sustainable living. Our Kings have envisioned a future that harmonises technological progress with cultural resilience, economic growth with environmental stewardship, and innovation with human values. It is, therefore, the sacred responsibility of the educators, policymakers, and institutional leaders not merely to prepare young people for the future, but to empower them with the knowledge, skills and mindset to shape it. Education must therefore be reimagined to realise His Majesty The King's noble aspirations and enable greater progress, shared prosperity, and lasting peace – within ourselves, our communities, and the world.

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