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Raising Standards and Transforming Lives: Sustainable Development Through Importing University Education to Nepal

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Introduction

In 2016, 17 United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted by world leaders of the 193 member states of the UN. These goals are universal to all countries with the aim of ending all forms of poverty, fighting inequalities and tackling climate change while ensuring that no one is left behind. The goals recognise that strategies for ending poverty go hand-in-hand with economic growth and that education forms part of that growth. The SDGs are nationally owned and country-led. All stakeholders in a country are expected to conform to these goals. Multi-stakeholder partnerships are recognised as an important component for meeting the goals (UN 2018).

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The SDGs do not differentiate between the economic status of countries: every UN member state is expected to commit to them (Leydon 2018). This could be in-country and also supporting other countries in developing their education.

The UN SDG 4 states that: “Obtaining a quality education is the foundation to creating sustainable development. In addition to improving the quality of life, access to inclusive education can help equip locals with the tools required to develop innovative solutions to the world’s greatest problems.” (UN 2018).

These are demonstrated by the specific goals below:

Goal 4.3: “By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university”.

Goal 4.4: “By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship”.

Goal 4B: “By 2020, substantially expand globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries, in particular least-developed countries, small island developing states and African countries, for enrolment in higher education, including vocational training and information and communications technology, technical, engineering and scientific programmes, in developed countries and other developing countries” (UN 2018).

This research focuses on an inner-London university in the UK which franchises and validates undergraduate provision of computing and business courses. These courses are delivered in Nepal in the conurbations of Kathmandu, Pokhara and Itahari. This research demonstrates how, by importing education into developing countries, a contribution is made to achieving the UN’s sustainability goals.

Research into the impact of transnational education (TNE) operating outside of the UK is limited. This research goes some way to addressing how TNE can impact beneficially on the host country.

Context

Setting up a partnership is initially a financial transaction between the home institution and the host. However, it can become so much more as graduates who enter the workplace become equipped with the latest international education and are able to rise rapidly in organisations.

The partnership in Nepal started in 2012 with undergraduate computing courses offered as a franchise at a private college in Kathmandu. It has grown into a large and successful partnership which now includes business and computing courses at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. It has also expanded outside of Kathmandu to Itahari in the east and Pokhara in the west. This enables students who are unable to travel within Nepal to study for a UK degree.

There are currently over 2000 students studying at the college in Kathmandu on franchised courses that include BSc (Hons) Computing, BA (Hons) Accounting and Finance, an MBA and validated courses that include BSc (Hons) Computer Networking and IT Security, BSc (Hons) Multimedia Technologies, MSc IT and Applied Security and BA (Hons) Business Administration.

There are several methods of providing international education locally and this paper refers to UK university courses and awards being offered with an overseas partner in Nepal, and these are either franchised or validated provisions. Franchising enables the partner to deliver the same course that is delivered in the home country (British Council 2013).

In the case of the Nepal partnership a number of the courses are franchised and the local partner provides the physical infrastructure, the facilities such as computing and library and the academic and administrative staff. They also provide the marketing and recruitment of students. The University provides materials and assessments in the first year, after which the partner is expected to develop the material and write their own assessments which are approved by the University. They are also responsible for the external examination of the assessments and the annual quality monitoring. The students enrol with the partner and the partner pays the University a fee for each student.

Validated courses are those which do not run in the home university although the university must have expertise in the subject area. The local institution is responsible for the design and delivery of the courses. This is in line with what many other universities do when operating with partners (Drew et al. 2008; Healey 2017).

Nepal is a landlocked country surrounded by China and India, and is home to the world's highest mountain, Mount Everest. The population is approximately 29.3 million and the main language is Nepali. Nepal is also a rural economy with few natural resources and poor infrastructure. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Nepal is ranked as the 25th poorest country in the world with an average income of less than \$918 a year. The IMF calculates this according to purchasing power parity (PPP) per capita. This enables a comparison of the relative cost of living standards and inflation rate across the world. According to the IMF, most of the poorest countries have regimes which deter foreign investors (IMF 2019). Itahari is in the east of Nepal 19 miles from the Indian border and is a fast-growing transport hub. Its fertile plain means that it is a mainly agriculture area. Pokara in the west of Nepal is at the foot of the Annapurna mountain range and is the second-largest city in Nepal. It is a major tourist destination for trekkers.

When researching TNE the culture of the country needs to be considered as this can impact on how educational provision is developed. Using Hofstede's 'cultural dimensions' (Hofstede 1991), Nepal can be considered as having a fairly high 'power distance', i.e., a highly uneven distribution of power and authority. This suggests that people accept the hierarchical order and employees in an organisation can be expected to be told what to do rather than make decisions. When delivering a course, both the UK university and the Nepalese organisation need to enable lecturers to localise the provision of the degree to make it more relevant to the students.

Nepal can also be considered a collectivist culture in that there is a high commitment to the family group, and a feminine culture in which the dominant values in society are caring for others and quality of life with a focus on working together. This is demonstrated through commitment to the family, extended family or community. Loyalty in a collectivist culture is seen as important and everyone takes responsibility for fellow

members of their group. The downside of this is that nepotism can influence employment decisions and it can be hard to gain employment in prestigious organisations. Therefore, those who are unable to pursue an international education abroad may feel at a disadvantage.

Nepal has a medium to low preference for avoiding uncertainty. This dimension from Hofstede proposes that people are not averse to taking risks, are comfortable with change and, when given the opportunity, will explore new ideas and embrace innovation. Therefore, delivering a degree in a country where the focus is on innovation can enhance graduate employability.

There are currently 10 state universities operating in Nepal. These tend to be over-subscribed which means private providers step in to provide university education, often in partnership with international universities. For courses to be offered in Nepal they have to be registered with the Nepalese Department of Education (DOE) (UNESCO 2011). By offering international university degrees they enable students to study for an internationally recognised qualification in-country, therefore saving on international travel costs and international university fees as well as enabling those who are unable to travel to study for an international degree.

Healey (2017) suggests that by offering international degrees in developing countries international universities are able to capture 98% of the non-mobile local market. Where a higher education sector is underdeveloped and the local universities do not have the capacity to expand their provision, TNE can increase participation in higher education (Vincent-Lancrin 2007). From a UK university perspective it enables a global reach which can enhance their reputation and increase income as, although students pay a lesser fee to study in the local country, some may complete further study in the UK. Stafford and Taylor (2016) argue that TNE helps to diversify universities' internationalisation strategies which meet the needs of a global economy as well as generating revenue for the university. For the more altruistic it is also a way for universities to contribute to social and economic development in the partnership country.

One of the main reason students go abroad is because demand cannot be satisfied in their home country and there is a perceived difference in quality between local and international degrees (Beine et al. 2014; Rosenzweig 2006). For the local student the cost of studying in their

home country is considerably lower (Kapur and Crowley 2008). It is also hoped that students will remain in their country and share their skills with others. Levantino (2017) argues that students who are able to study aboard will do so and, on completion, aim to return to their home country. However, studying in the UK is expensive as fees, accommodation and subsistence can cost around £50,000 a year. Where provision is provided in the home country, students may prefer to stay at home and study with an international university. Pyvis and Chapman (2007) and Levantino (2017) suggest that the motivations of students who stay and study with an international provider and those who leave and study abroad are the same. Students perceive that an international degree is of higher quality than a local provider and will be more widely recognised than one from their own country. In addition, they feel that they will be exposed to foreign curricula and different teaching styles through access to Western lecturers. There is, however, the fear that employers may not recognise the degree when studying with a local partner.

TNE can play a major role in improving the economic growth of a country. By educating a person one educates a family which, in turn, can educate a generation. Therefore, it is not only one person that can benefit but a whole community. This results in a greater value being applied to education and this will increase participation which can filter down to others in the community. However, there are also criticisms of TNE where it can be seen as imparting western values on poorer countries (Wade 2003; Tikly 2004).

TNE expands the pool of internationally educated workers in a country. The result should not only be an improved economy where productivity is increased but also enhanced skills and knowledge. Where some technology subjects are not offered in local universities it also can ensure that a skilled workforce is available and therefore experienced professionals do not have to be imported into a country. This helps to keep unemployment levels down and means that money to pay foreign nationals is not exported.

Method

The study was conducted with past and present students from Kathmandu, Itahari and Pokhara, Nepal. Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the college with current and past students using their current student registrations and the alumni network.

Twenty former students participated in the research. These were from Kathmandu and the current students were from Kathmandu, Pokhara and Itahari. The current students were both undergraduate and postgraduate, whereas the past students all graduated with a Bachelor degree in either IT or Business.

A thematic analysis was carried out to look for shared themes across the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). Themes of employment, finance, mobility, family and status emerged from the research.

Results and Discussion

The findings of the interviews demonstrate the impact the partnership has on the local community.

Employment

This theme demonstrates the importance of employment for the students. As part of a collectivist culture, students recognised the need to get a good job to support their family.

The graduates had all found employment in Nepal and were working either in IT or business. There is a huge demand for IT skills in the workplace and an under-supply of IT education by the state which is not considered to be of international quality.

One student describes how their degree enabled them to join a major IT company: 'I found that by having a UK degree my skills are in high demand, more so than if I had come from a Nepalese university. A UK degree is seen as more current and innovative.' (Past IT 1).

Another student graduating in Business decided to start their own business: 'I found this course really useful. I wanted to work for myself and this course is very entrepreneurship focused. We were also able to practice our business skills and enter competitions to win funding. I would not have been able to do this at a state university.' (Past BBA 4).

Employment is important for the students as there is no unemployment support and they would have to rely on their families to survive.

The students embrace innovation and found that a UK degree gives them the skills needed to achieve this. This is consistent with Nepalese culture having a medium to low proclivity for uncertainty avoidance as identified by Hofstede (1991). Nepal scores 40% for uncertainty avoidance. The students tolerate risk and will adopt new ideas. This suggests that by achieving a degree they are more likely to improve their business and professional practice, either as an employee or as an entrepreneur, which will make them more marketable. In an ideal world they would prefer a good job, and a UK degree will help them achieve this. But given the shortage of good jobs in Nepal, many have to work for themselves or join the family business and a degree is a way for them to develop new skills which will improve their business practices.

Finance

Many students were conscious of the investment their families had made for their education. They recognised that local education would be cheaper but their job prospects would not be as good.

One student describes why they chose to study for an international degree:

I chose to study BA (Hons) Business Administration. I belong to a simple middle-class family where my father is a truck driver and my mother is a housewife. To spend around 8 Lakhs (£5000) in the Bachelors degree was not that easy for my family. My father was really disappointed in my decision to study for a UK BBA as other local universities in Nepal were offering the course for less than 5 Lakhs (£3500).... But I stayed committed to my decision.... My parents fulfilled my wish by taking a loan from a bank

and I am very much conscious about the investment my parents made in me and I have always been focused on studying hard so that I could make them proud. (Current BBA 3)

As a collectivist society the students recognised the sacrifice that their family had made in investing in their education. Although they recognised that studying abroad was not an option due to the expense, they felt that this was the next best thing and an international degree would make them more employable.

Global Focus

The UK course is seen as having a more international focus: 'I will be better able to do well in business. Now my dream of becoming an entrepreneur has started. I am able to practice business skills as I am given scenarios not only in Nepal but also in the whole world.' (Current *BBA 5*).

The students commented that a Nepalese degree would not allow them to practice their skills as a Nepalese degree focused on theory and the exams were based on the repetition of facts rather than their application.

Other students commented on the benefit of a UK degree by saying:

I had been able to participate in many real business events representing the college and I am very much thankful to our college for providing me with that opportunity which helped me to get the outer exposure and meet the professionals and network with them. (Past BBA 2)

The LTW (lecture, tutorial and workshop) method was a totally new thing for me. This made me understand more deeply all of the modules we have to cover. We are made more focused to think practically which was the most beneficial thing for us. (Current BBA 1)

Family and Community

Students talked a lot about their families. Most of the students live at home and decisions are usually collective and not only involve the immediate family but also the extended family.

Staying in Nepal and being able to receive an international education will enable them to have a good qualification. One student sums it up by saying ‘I just feel lucky that while staying in Nepal with my own family I have been able to get the internationally standard learning environment’. (Current IT 3).

A current student says that although economically his family’s lives had not changed, he has made his family proud:

Although my family is still struggling financially, I am hopeful that I could give them a better life in the next 5 years. I have started the base of my career and developed my own food business and I am working hard to make this business a great success. I have a dream to change many people’s lives not only my own. (Current BBA 1)

Several students started their own business rather than go into employment. This is particularly the case for business students where there is more competition for jobs from the state universities. Several students talked about the impact they are having on their communities: ‘I started dreaming of becoming an entrepreneur and trying to do something for others. While studying BABA, I helped up my maternal uncle in upgrading his business so he can be more competitive.’ (Current BBA 4).

Another student mentions that he has: ‘encouraged a Fitness Club to organise a blood donation programme as a Corporate Social Responsibility (I learned from the College that CSR is very important for sustaining business in the long term).’ (Past BBA 3).

‘My own food company has donated our products to the Old Age Committee for all the members staying there. Plus, I am now employing five people and this will increase once I have my factory.’ (Past BBA 1).

The importance of using their skills is evident from their responses and they feel that Nepalese education would give them knowledge but not skills which they could apply in the workplace.

Mobility

The students choose to stay in Nepal mainly due to financial and/or family responsibilities. In fact many of the students from outside Kathmandu do not want to move even within Nepal.

A student from Pokhara said: 'Why should I move, my family are here. This area of Nepal is very beautiful and living in Kathmandu is very noisy and polluted, plus I would have to pay for accommodation.' (Current IT 3).

As has been stated above, Nepal is a poor country and many students would be unable to afford international fees and this can make them less mobile. As a student from Itahari stated:

I am from a professional family, my father is a teacher.... I am lucky that I learned English at school but I would not be able to go abroad to study as it is too expensive.... I have two brothers and two sisters at home and once I have graduated I will be able to get a good job and help pay for their education. (Current IT 2)

One student also mentioned that they wanted to study in the UK but it was expensive and difficult to get a visa. UK universities also wanted specific English qualifications such as IELTS which can be expensive. UK universities require an English Language qualification recognised by UK Visas and Immigration for study in the UK. In Nepal it is recognised that these qualifications require a passport to be able to sit the test which many students don't have. Therefore, local institutions often use their own tests to ensure students have language proficiency.

This is an account from a Business student as to the impact obtaining a UK degree has had on his career:

I come from a small village based on the outskirts of Kathmandu. The family is not very well off and could not have afforded to send their child abroad to study. I am the first person in the community to have gone to university and to have a degree. By studying hard and achieving top marks I have managed to secure a fully paid scholarship in the UK to study a master's course.

If he had not had the opportunity do a UK degree in Nepal he would not have been able to go on to further study in the UK: 'When I have finished my degree I will return to Nepal and I plan to teach at a University. This will enable me to get a good income and provide for my family.' (Past BBA 2).

Status

Many students see a UK degree as a means to faster career progression. The IT students were all able to get jobs and start their careers and many of these have been with global companies. This can be summed up by a past student who states:

When I graduated I walked straight into a job and started to work as a programmer with a global company. I have now been with the company two years and I have been promoted twice. My skills are more up-to-date than those who were educated in Nepalese universities. I felt I had an advantage over others when I started my career as I had an international degree. I am lucky; I am not from a rich family and my family doesn't have the connections that rich people have but I am able to succeed on my own merits and I am sure that a UK degree has helped. (Past IT 5)

The graduates from the programmes suggest that all students achieve employment and most are able to progress up the career ladder or start their own businesses and thus make an economic contribution to their families and the community.

Conclusion

Although the UN sustainable development goals primarily focus on literacy and numeracy one should not overlook the impact of delivery of a UK university education in Nepal. This educational provision enhances the lives of students who either could not afford or are unable to leave Nepal to study abroad.

The impact of delivering UK degree courses in Nepal means that a UK education can be offered to students who are unable to study outside of their country.

The benefit is that UK Nepalese graduates now enjoy successful careers in Nepal and have been able to develop in the workforce to benefit the Nepalese economy. Support from a UK university has also enabled them to develop and grow their own businesses.

By working in partnership with other providers it is important that there is a match in values for this UK university. Equality and diversity are therefore seen as important. This meets UN SDG 4.3 in ensuring that there is equality of opportunity.

As the courses continue to grow, more local students have the opportunity to study and gain up-to-date skills for employment which enables them to get decent jobs or become entrepreneurs. This ensures that SDG 4.4 is being met.

The university provides a Master's scholarship for successful graduates which not only pays the students fees but also covers living costs. This enables those who would normally not be able to study in the UK to further their education at postgraduate level. This meets UN SDG 4B.

This study adds to the knowledge of how university education contributes to sustainability in the partner country and, as a result, transforms lives and develops communities.

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