Nepali Lifeworld and Its Higher Education System: A Critical Assessment of the Dis/Connection

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Abstract

Higher education is understood as a key educational sector for preparing young adults to fulfil the human resource needs of the global capital market. This chapter, using Habermasian theorisation of the lifeworld, challenges this understanding as inadequate for its ignorance of cultural, social and individual needs and argues for making the higher education sector responsive to the local contexts.

Keywords

Nepal – lifeworld – Habermas – higher education

1 Introduction

A dominant body of literature (OECD, 1996; World Bank, 2002) takes higher education as a vehicle for creating competitive knowledge-based economies (KBE). However, in recent years, scholars (Brown-Luthango, 2013; Hall, 2009, 2019; McMahon, 2009; Murray, 2009; Regmi, 2019c; Strier, 2014) have critiqued the idea of creating competitive KBE and focussed on making higher education more responsive to the needs of local communities, especially in developing countries such as Nepal.

Higher education system in Nepal started with the establishment of Tri-Chandra College, the first higher education institution of Nepal, established in 1918. The curricula used by Tri-Chandra College were borrowed from Patna University, an Indian university established by the British colonial rulers (Regmi, 2019c). The first university of Nepal, Tribhuvan University, was established in 1959. As its main objective was to produce graduates capable of getting employment in the job market, almost nothing was done to connect its teaching and research to Nepal's contemporary community contexts. Some of the Faculties

that were established to address the needs of rural Nepali communities, such as Agriculture and Rural Development, focussed on how modern tools and techniques can be injected into the lifeworld practices, rather than developing curricula through a bottom-up or practice-to-theory approach. Curricula, syllabi, reference materials and textbooks reflected the realities of Western countries rather than the realities of Nepali lifeworlds (Bhatt, 1974).

TABLE 3.1 Number of Higher Education Institutions of Nepal (as of 2017)

	Name of universities	Community campuses	Constituent campuses	Private campuses	Total
1	Tribhuvan University	524	60	577	1,161
2	Nepal Sanskrit University	2	14	2	18
3	Kathmandu University	0	6	15	21
4	Purbanchal University	6	5	120	131
5	Pokhara University	0	4	58	62
6	Lumbini Buddha University	0	1	5	6
7	Agriculture and Forestry University	0	2	0	2
8	Mid-Western University	0	1	0	1
9	Far-Western University	0	1	0	1
10	BP Koirala Institute for Health Sciences	0	1	0	1
11	National Academy of Medical Sciences	0	1	0	1
12	Patan Academy of Health Sciences	0	1	0	1
13	Karnali Academy of Health Sciences	0	1	0	1
14	Nepal Open University	0	0	0	0
15	Rajarshi Janak University	0	0	0	0
	Total	532	98	777	1,407

SOURCE: GON (2017)

The history of Nepal's higher education shows that a few attempts were made to establish university-community connections, or how the academic field of higher education and the lifeworld contexts can work together for the betterment of Nepali societies. For example, the National Education System

Plan (1971–1976¹) had brought the provision of sending university students out to teach in rural communities of Nepal as a part of the National Development Service (NDS). Spending a year in rural areas by working with rural people – mainly participating in development activities, including teaching in local schools – was a compulsory course requirement for obtaining a post-graduate degree from Tribhuvan University (Regmi, 2017b).

Even though most of the educational projects in Nepal have been funded by foreign donors such as the World Bank (Regmi, 2019a) the NDS was started in 1974 with almost no external support except a small amount of financial assistance from UNICEF and the Canadian International Development Research Centre (IDRC) (Yadama & Messerschmidt, 2004). However, no significant attempt has been made after the NESP ended in the late 1970s. As human capital theory, which aims to cater to the needs of the system than the needs of the lifeworld, has guided higher education policies and practices of Nepal (Regmi, 2019c), the disconnection between the Nepali lifeworld and its higher education system has increased.

There is only a scant body of scholarly literature for understanding the connection between Nepal's higher education system and local communities. For example, Regmi (2019c) analysed key policy documents produced by the World Bank and the Government of Nepal (GoN) for implementing three most recent higher education projects in Nepal, and found that its higher education sector has become “increasingly unresponsive to the needs of Nepali communities and societies” (p. 1). Similarly, Bista, Sharma and Raby (2020) argue that Nepal's higher education prompted “generations of Nepali young people to practically and metaphorically leave behind rural life and society, to ignore their social reality” (p. 16). This chapter, drawing mainly on Habermas, aims to contribute to this emerging body of literature from a sociological perspective.

While some of the founding fathers of sociology, such as Emile Durkheim and Talcott Parsons, used a system theory to study society, Habermas found it insufficient; hence he used both lifeworld and system perspectives. A lifeworld perspective of society helps to understand how the social integration among families and communities are achieved, whereas a system perspective allows to explore how political, economic, and educational systems are created for achieving system integration. Drawing on Habermas (1984, 1987), I conceptualise the three components of the Nepali lifeworld² as culture, society, and personality.³ In this respect, I understand culture as “the stock of knowledge” held by the lifeworld members; society as the level of integration among lifeworld members through which they “secure solidarity”; and personality as the capability of each member of the lifeworld for achieving prosperity (Habermas, 1987, p. 138).

In the following section, using the Habermasian theory of communicative action (Habermas, 1984, 1987) as a theoretical framework, I explore the extent to which Nepali higher education system is dis/connected from the local community context and the consequences that the dis/connection has brought in the Nepali lifeworld.

2 Nepali Lifeworld and the Higher Education System

Nepal is predominantly a rural-agricultural country, where majority of the people live in small villages, which achieve social integration through the exchange of labour (known as *parma* in Nepali), goods, kinship and family relationships. Children, especially sons – because many ethnic groups are patriarchal⁴ – share parental properties and learn to live from parents and other elders of their communities. As an individual born and raised in one of the remote parts of Nepal, the kind of social fabric that binds the people and community together is something I understand as the social integration of Nepali lifeworld. The following quote is helpful to conceive a Nepali society from a lifeworld perspective:

The null point of a spatiotemporal and social reference system, of a world that is within my actual reach. The city around the building site, the region, the country, the continent, and so on, constitute, as regards space, a world within my potential reach; corresponding to this, in respect to time, we have the daily routine, the life history, the epoch, and so forth; and in the social dimension, the reference groups from the family through the community, nation, and the like, to the world society. (Habermas, 1987, p. 123)

By looking through the system perspective, it is evident that, even though Nepal is still a rural-agricultural country, the families and communities are governed not merely by community elders but by the bureaucratic, educational, economic, and political systems developed at municipal, provincial, and federal levels. The acts of knowledge production, conflict resolution, and socialisation – which were mostly “within the actual reach” of lifeworld members – are now increasingly detached from its cultural norms and values (Habermas, 1987, p. 123). For example, the adult community of Nepali villages are not regarded as authorities to produce knowledge, debate on critical issues that arise in communities, and seek solutions of societal problems and challenges. These authorities are now increasingly exercised by political institutions (e.g. political

parties), educational institutions (e.g. educational planners, policy makers and teachers) and administrative institutions, mainly the bureaucrats who are appointed by the municipal, provincial and federal governments.

As the communities are increasingly controlled by the system mechanisms, there is a greater emphasis on strengthening political, economic and educational systems. The lifeworld of Nepali community is increasingly disconnected from what these systems aim to achieve, which I understand as increasing disconnection between the lifeworld and the system. For example, in recent decades the GoN is trying to write school textbooks in minority languages, to promote linguistic diversity. But, as Pradhan (2019) notes, they are increasingly “disconnected from [the] local realities” (p. 86) and the authority to hold the authenticity of those languages has shifted from community people to those curriculum developers, textbook writers and teachers. In this chapter, I restrict myself to the higher education system, even if other systems are also disconnected from the Nepali lifeworld.

Using the three structural components of the lifeworld as theoretical lenses noted above, in the following section, I argue that Nepal’s higher education system (a) should reinstate the knowledge production function of the cultural world so that the higher education could be recoupled with the lifeworld practices; (b) it should focus on building solidarity in the social world so that a high degree of social integration can be achieved; and (c) it should help individuals to develop their personality so that they can use their knowledge and skills for economic prosperity.

3 Disconnection at Cultural Level

The disconnection at cultural level is caused by the neglect of knowledge production function of the lifeworld. The lifeworld provides each member of the society with the stock of knowledge that they can use for social interaction. This stock of tacit knowledge “is not the knowledge generated by a single human subject” (Regmi, 2017a, p. 691); neither it is the knowledge generated by a pure science in universities or science labs. The stock of knowledge is in fact “a collection of ideas, experiences, and rationalisations of all the members of the society and their ancestors”, which transfers from one generation to the next (Regmi, 2017a, p. 691). An interesting point to highlight here is that the stock of lifeworld knowledge keeps on expanding as people use for their daily practices. If there are any bits of knowledges or beliefs that are not useful for guiding current and future practices, they are automatically discarded by the lifeworld members. Since there is much focus on strengthening the system, the

lifeworld is colonised. As a result, the stock of knowledge is shrinking because neither it has gotten equal value as human capital knowledge, nor the lifeworld members are regarded as authentic knowledge producers.

The human capital knowledge, which is the stock of knowledge produced by science for enabling individuals to secure jobs in the capitalist system, has replaced the stock of knowledge held by the lifeworld. The human capital knowledge does have value for enabling individuals to achieve material gain, which can be tied with the instrumental function of the lifeworld. In fact, lifeworld members have never devalued the instrumental knowledge that can be differentiated in the forms of skills they required for hunting, gathering, and farming (Habermas, 1987). As the world societies have entered into knowledge-based economies, these forms of instrumental knowledge have been transformed into modern skills, such as computing. They are crucial prerequisites for developing knowledge-based societies, but what is happening now is that this transformation has valued only human capital knowledge, which has led to the colonisation of the lifeworld knowledge (Habermas, 1984). In this particular context, this transformation should be understood as the colonisation of the knowledge production function of the lifeworld by the higher education system.

Nepal's higher education system should fulfil at least two major responsibilities for decolonising the knowledge production function of the lifeworld. First, the higher education system should value the capacity of each individual, especially adults because of their experiences, for producing knowledge. This responsibility can be fulfilled by increasing university-community connection in a range of forms and scopes, including community peoples' active engagement in developing curricula and undertaking research (Hall, 2019; Taylor & Kahlke, 2017). And second, the higher education system should complement the instrumental knowledge production function of the lifeworld, as the lifeworld knowledge may not be adequate in technologically advanced knowledge-based economies. Only in this respect that the importance of human capital knowledge can be justified for the lifeworld. The revitalisation of adult members' role as knowledge producers will also help to remove the stigma attached to them as illiterate (Regmi, 2019b).

4 Disconnection at Social Level

The social responsibility of higher education at social level can be understood as the potential of the lifeworld to strengthen solidarity at municipal, provincial and federal levels. Administrative units are created at each of these levels for

strengthening bureaucratic and political systems; therefore, it is at the community level that Nepal's higher education system should aim to achieve social solidarity.

Even though lifeworld members are connected through the bidding force of norms and culture, there is no certainty that conflict will not happen in the lifeworld contexts. The theoretical discussion presented above may indicate that "every contingency, every unintended consequence, every unsuccessful coordination, every conflict is expunged" from the lifeworld perspective of studying society (Habermas, 1987, p. 148). Thus, taking a lifeworld perspective does not necessarily mean that we should idealise everything that happens in the lifeworld as good practices; neither should we assume that Nepali society should move backward from modern to traditional forms, which is opposed by the proponents of modernisation theory (Regmi, 2018). The reason for adding an emphasis to the lifeworld perspective is the fact that individuals secure "the integration of society" through "a web of communicative actions that thrive only in the light of cultural traditions, and not systematic mechanisms that are out of the reach of member's intuitive knowledge" (Habermas, 1987, p. 149).

To explore the disconnection at the social level, it is important to understand the difference between social integration (a key feature of the lifeworld) and system integration (a key feature of the system) I alluded to the above section. In the context of Nepal, social integration should be understood as an integration among lifeworld members, achieved through the binding force of cultural, linguistic, traditional and religious norms. On the other hand, system integration should be understood as the attempts made by the state, such as the division of communities into municipalities. The geographical boundaries, municipal laws, monetary systems, and bureaucratic systems are the key binding forces for achieving system integration.

While the social integrations that we find in Nepali lifeworld have no beginning or a documented history, the system integration started along with the beginning of Nepal as a nation-state, which accelerated after the 1950s. Nepali lifeworlds have been rapidly changing since the 1950s due to the political, educational and economic changes. Some macro-level systemic changes, such as introductions of democracy, mass education, and economic modernisation, started during the 1950s. The higher education system of Nepal, which also expanded after the establishment of its first university in 1959, has the responsibility of strengthening both social and system integrations. A message I am trying to convey here is not that we should completely discard the role of political, educational and economic systems; rather, my message is that Nepal should reinstate social integration so that a stronger connection could

be established between the lifeworld and other systems including higher education system.

With 125 caste/ethnic groups, 123 languages, and several religious groups, Nepal is truly a multicultural country (CBS Nepal, 2012). Even if these groups are still bound to some extent by the normative forces inherent in their ethnicities, languages and religious beliefs, they are increasingly colonised by the norm-free forces of economic, educational, political and bureaucratic systems. In this respect, I would argue that to connect Nepal's higher education system with its lifeworlds, some consecrated efforts should be made to recouple the higher education with the norm-binding forces prevalent in ethnic, linguistic and religious groups.

5 Disconnection at Individual Level

The disconnection between Nepali lifeworld and its higher education system has a historical root that started from the quest of achieving modernisation (Regmi, 2017b). Guided by the idea of social Darwinism, the modernist model of development celebrates the capitalist forms of change, which focus on preparing individuals to be competitive as well as better/superior than other individuals (Regmi, 2016). This idea proliferated in the context of Nepal because it already had a hierarchical caste *system*,⁵ which can be understood as the beginning of the colonisation of Nepali lifeworlds.

Until the late 1940s, Nepal was ruled by an autocratic Rana family,⁶ a higher caste group that exploited the resources of the state and bureaucratic power to control and govern ethnic groups. The Rana regime not only exercised autocracy, but also an internal colonisation for more than a century in Nepal (Regmi, 2019b). After Nepal transitioned from the Rana regime to the multi-party democracy during the 1950s, national leaders wanted to achieve modernisation through mass education, but failed to develop an education system suitable for the Nepali lifeworld. As the human capital model was evolving as a dominant model of education in the West, it was seen as the only possibility for making Nepali citizens competitive for the job market. I would argue that this is the root cause of current mismatch between educational qualifications of the graduates and the real need of Nepali lifeworlds.

In recent decades, the number of universities and students' enrolment in them have increased. In 2017, the number of students enrolled were 3,61,077 with the majority of them in Tribhuvan University (2,84,452),⁷ Pokhara University (26,032), Purbanchal University (23,539), and Kathmandu University

(16,658) (GoN, 2017). Most of the students were enrolled in Bachelor's Degrees (3,18,752), Master's Degrees (40,652) and 1,537 in MPhil and PhD combined. In terms of subjects, majority of the students enrolled in Management (15,255) followed by Education (89,662), Science and Technology (35,625) and Medical Sciences (19,274). Some disciplines, such as Forestry and Agriculture, have less than one percent of total students enrolled in higher education. It is of interest to note here that the country, with the majority of the people involved in agriculture as main occupation, has less than one percent students enrolled in Agriculture.

The number of people leaving for higher education in foreign countries has also increased. According to the latest data available (GoN, 2017), 67,226 students obtained No Objection Letters in 2017 from the Ministry of Education, which is one of the valid means to track student migration from Nepal.

TABLE 3.2 Nepali students' most popular higher education destinations

Country	Number of students who left Nepal in 2017
Australia	33,241
Japan	15,259
India	2,598
USA	2,418
China	1,860
South Korea	1,176
Canada	1,052

SOURCE: GON (2017)

A key message of the analysis presented above is that Nepali youths have a strong desire for achieving material gain and economic prosperity by pursuing higher education, which is a positive sign of upward social mobility. However, this desire for participation in higher education is marred by the stark reality of unemployment. Like in many developing countries, the issue of transforming economies by matching education skills with available jobs in home countries has been a key concern in Nepal (United Nations, 2015). As the higher education system has failed to produce graduates as per the demand of rural communities, the time and resources invested in higher education has been wasted. The majority of graduates have neither got jobs in the market for achieving economic prosperity nor are they able to contribute to the lifeworld.

6 Conclusion

Even though Nepal is a young country (about 55% of the total population is below 25 years), either willingly or by obligation, the majority of them are leaving agricultural and familial occupations; rather they would like to pursue jobs in service sectors. However, as the country is reeling on loans and grants from foreign donors, it is unable to create new jobs for the graduates (Regmi, 2017c). As a consequence, a large number of youths have either left Nepal or are trying to leave for opportunities in other countries. Between the years 2007 and 2017, about 3.5 million people have migrated, mainly to Malaysia, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, as migrant workers (MOLE Nepal, 2018). The remittance sent by those workers constitutes a major source of national economy. More than 20% of the total GDP was covered by remittances obtained from the migrant workers in 2011 (Khare & Slany, 2011), which has increased to about 29% in 2018. Both migrant workers and their families have paid heavy social costs for this. As I have illustrated above, the cost can be understood as an increasing disconnection at cultural, social and individual levels.

The disconnection between the Nepali lifeworlds and higher education accelerated because of the use of the neoliberal human capital rationale to justify the importance of higher education. The human capital theory started to influence the higher education systems of the Western countries during the 1960s, but it came to be a *de facto* policy imperative for the developing countries, including Nepal, after the late 1970s (Regmi, 2015). While making plans and policies, no attempts were made to measure the non-market and social benefits that could have been achieved through investment in higher education (Albrecht & Ziderman, 1995; McMahan, 2009). As the rationale for the investment in higher education is justified solely with economic reasons, policy makers and planners do not see the importance of higher education through the lifeworld perspective. Partly, this is the reason that the social benefits of higher education, which could have strengthened Nepali lifeworlds, were not highlighted while setting educational goals and objectives.

Even though the lifeworld is the foundation of every society, there is no guarantee that the lifeworld is adequate in itself. Without having a system that aims to recouple higher education with the lifeworld at cultural, social and individual levels “we cannot grasp the limitations of a lifeworld that is dependent upon, and changes along with, a cultural stock of knowledge that can be expanded at any time” (Habermas, 1987, p. 135). This is the reason every society needs to develop a socially responsive higher education system but, as this chapter emphasised, the system must be recoupled with the lifeworld.

Notes

- 1 Even though the NESP brought some important policies such as the National Development Service (NDS), it could not help to decolonise Nepali lifeworld from the system as the emphasis was on creating a monolingual Nepali state.
- 2 See Regmi (2020) for a more comprehensive application of Habermasian theory to lifelong learning.
- 3 In some places I have replaced the word “personality” with “individual” in order to pair up with another word “level”, e.g. individual level.
- 4 It is important to note that all traditional and cultural practices of Nepali societies are not flawless. Gender and caste-based discriminations should not be understood as the key features of the Nepali lifeworld; rather, they are something to be removed from the system to unleash the true potential of what the lifeworld members could achieve collectively.
- 5 The caste system, which is mistakenly understood as a feature of Nepali (as well as Indian) communities, are not the real features of Nepali lifeworld. As the term ‘system’ itself suggests, the caste hierarchy is the feature of the system; but not the feature of the lifeworld.
- 6 Though monarchy, which ended only in 2006, was also an autocratic regime (since the head of the state was always the first son of the King), the Rana regime was more autocratic because both King and Prime Minister were hereditary family members of the incumbents.
- 7 Tribhuvan University is one of the largest universities in the world, in terms of student enrolment.

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