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A Proposal for an Open University of Nepal for Providing Higher Education to the Rural and Marginalized People

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Abstract:

The disadvantaged and marginalized groups in Nepal, and particularly women and *Dalits*, face grave hurdles to acquire post secondary education. Lack of educational access has deprived the rural and marginalized groups of opportunities to realize their full potential as citizens. Further, the larger society is not able to utilize the potential contribution of all citizens for socio-economic development.

NRNA and CFFN are proposing to support the establishment of an Open University in Nepal which by creating an open admission process can substantially improve the educational access for the disadvantaged groups. The Government of Nepal has already initiated the planning to establish such a university. The government has also carried out the initial scoping for this project and clear need is well established for such an institution. NRNA and CFFN wish to provide solid collaborative services.

This paper provides an assessment of need for an Open University of Nepal and discusses several aspects of planning for the university. It provides an outline of the pedagogical areas, a preliminary business plan, and a vision of management and administration of the institution.

This paper also identifies the core proponents of the initiative, potential institutional collaboration and an initial plan of action.

Key words: Open University, Distance education, Nepal, Diaspora, Core proponents

1. Background:

Since 1951, when the country was first opened to the outside world, Nepal has made impressive strides in the education sector. The literacy level in this period has climbed from a rate of less than five percent to almost 60 percent today, with youth literacy of 85 percent for males and 73 percent for females as per UNDP data for 2007. Nepal now boasts of eight universities and more than thousand colleges. The most impressive feat is perhaps, the

proliferation of higher professional education, which is buttressed by almost 20 full-fledged medical colleges and hundreds of engineering colleges. Further, in the information technology (IT) sector, the Nepali Diaspora is thriving visibly in the international job market, particularly in North America, and Australia. For the relative small population size of the country, the number of Nepali IT professionals in North America compares favourably with their South Asian counterparts, except for India.

However, in the midst of these dramatic achievements, women, rural, poor and marginalized groups in Nepal have only limited access to educational bonanza that the urban and relatively well-to-do families have enjoyed. Literacy rate among women still hovers around 45 percent; and higher education access to most rural and marginalized groups remains a distant dream. Most of the universities and colleges are concentrated in and around urban centers, and mostly cater to those who can afford.

More than 80 percent of the Nepalese population lives in rural and remote areas, where insurmountable barriers exist in accessing higher education. UNESCO data indicate that Nepal has a mere nine percent tertiary education attendance of age adjusted groups, a low number compared to educationally advanced countries. Further, the attendance of women in tertiary education is reported at a dismal three percent. The educational figures for the rural and the marginalized population would be even lower.

Within South Asia, Nepal has the highest Gini Index (47.3)¹, a measure of economic inequality. Also, the percentage of females among professional and administrative workers in the country is low at 20 percent.² These wide inequalities among various groups within Nepal are major factors in impeding Nepal's efforts for a rapid economic development.

In Nepal, 38 percent students drop-out before completing Grade 5. Among those who do not drop out, the repeat rate is as high as 20 percent. Among those failing Grade 10, close to 90 percent do so in English, Math, or Science, indicating that the science and math education needs to be strengthened. Only a paltry nine percent of youth enter into tertiary level education.

¹ The Gini index lies between 0 and 100. A value of 0 represents absolute equality and 100 absolute inequalities). Data source: World Bank; Nepal Human Development Report 2009.

² Nepal Human Development Report 2009, UNDP.

Government of Nepal (GON) and major donor agencies have identified an Open University as a possible means to provide mass access to tertiary education. In this connection, Nepal became a signatory of SAARC Consortium on Open and Distance Learning (SACODiL) in 1999, making a commitment to build its own Open University. Subsequently, GON has been working on the establishment of an Open University, but the progress is hampered by the inadequacy of human, educational and financial resources.

As GON has already completed the background work and set the establishment of such a university as a priority, Nepali Diaspora can readily make use of the findings from demand analysis, and market and feasibility study that have been conducted for such a university.

A group of concerned Non-Resident Nepalis (NRN) academics and professionals have also realized that the open and distance education program as the most effective means in taking tertiary education to the rural areas of Nepal. Subsequently, Non-Resident Nepali Association (NRNA) in alliance with Canada Foundation for Nepal (CFFN) has brought forward an initiative to support the GON build an Open University of Nepal (OUN). The proposed OUN includes the following major objectives.

1. Close the gap in higher education demand, currently unmet by the combined capacity of all the institutions, through open and distance mechanisms.
2. Take tertiary education to the rural, remote, and marginalized people of Nepal, especially women and *Dalits*, who are practically confined to the villages due to family obligations, social challenges, and financial constraints.
3. Provide opportunities for teachers and government employees who are unable to advance their education, skills and careers while living in rural and remote places, or to those who are unemployed.
4. Provide a mechanism to continue education for the youth who take temporary or permanent employment in foreign countries.
5. Advance a computer-based education to rural Nepal that relates to health, social-systems, productivity, economic improvement, and sustainability disciplines.

Thanks to modern advancements in communication technology and the remarkable successes achieved by many institutions in distance education, it has now become possible to close the knowledge gap between the poor and the rich at a more accelerated rate than ever before.

2. Unique Opportunity for an Open University of Nepal:

The problem of education in Nepal's rural areas has been exacerbated by the ten year long armed-conflict that ended in 2006, and the situation remains difficult by the ongoing post-conflict instabilities. It is hard to find qualified people to work in rural and remote areas of the country. This situation is aggravated by the fact that those with the most knowledge and skills move to cities and increasingly to foreign countries.

The rural and other marginalized groups often languish in poor prospects in rural hinterlands. Some seek low paying foreign employment, particularly in the Middle East, Malaysia and few other global labour markets. On the other hand, the affluent families can afford to send their children to Nepal's urban centers and even in developed countries. In fact, while the disadvantaged communities in Nepal are deprived of educational opportunities and suffer massive unemployment, the outflow of the students from Nepal has seen a drastic rise in recent years. For instance, according to the Institute of International Education in the USA, in 2009, the number of Nepalese students ranked 11th among international students in the USA. And, the arrival of Nepalese students was 30 percent higher in the country in 2009 compared to the number in 2008. Similarly, some 8,000 Nepali students are reported to be leaving for Australia each year. Most of the Nepali students arriving in countries like USA, Australia and Canada often end up living there permanently, thus creating a shortage of trained manpower in Nepal.

For the above reasons, unlike in neighbouring India and China, Nepal faces critical capacity limitations in building a world-class Open University, mainly due to the shortage of qualified human resources within the country. On the positive side, however, at present, there are a sizable number of highly qualified academics and professionals among Nepalese Diaspora, who are eager to help the people their native land. Having benefited originally from the Nepal's investment in public education and having had first-hand experiences of Nepal, many of them are eager to give back in some form. A sizable number of this Diaspora group has experienced the hopelessness caused by poverty, have walked barefoot to attend schools in the mountains and plains, and have faced acute shortage of books and other educational facilities when they pursued their education in Nepal. As many of them have succeeded in obtaining world class education in spite of these insurmountable barriers, they understand the pain and frustrations of the rural poor and marginalized groups and their struggle for education, and know that success is still possible. Because of these reasons, they are well suited to help education in Nepal through open and distance learning and support the neediest groups.

The expertise, experiences and knowledge base gained by the Diaspora members can be a great asset to support a distance learning program in Nepal. This human resource coupled with the

high level of international good-will that Nepal enjoys, can be a winning combination to garner and mobilize both financial resources and human capital towards such efforts.

Harnessing the knowledge contribution from the critical mass of Nepali Diaspora and international contributors for building an Open University requires considerable organizational ability, management expertise, and collaboration and coordination skills. In partnership with GON, an innovative approach is required to take pedagogy, technologies, and instructional systems from distance places to the rural and marginalized people of Nepal.

3. The Mission:

The mission of the proposed OUN is to mobilize the NRN skills, knowledge, experiences and affinity to Nepal is to establish an internationally recognized institution of quality higher education for the remote, rural and marginalized population in Nepal.

How can such a sophisticated mode of delivering education be taken to remote locations in Nepal where people still struggle to have enough food and clothes and to own even a radio? Is there a scheme of transition for people to have distance learning infrastructure and human resource? Or will it remain as a distant dream until every family has personal computers and high-speed Internet? How can tools and techniques tested for colleges and universities of advanced nations be extended to reach the population of one of the poorest countries in the world?

That is where the task of capacity-building and discovering novel approaches comes in. That is where the role of institutional collaborations and international partnerships becomes important. That is where the formal and non-formal approaches have to meet in a unique way.

We are passing through a resourceful time in technological advancement and world-wide human cooperation. A vast number of first generation NRNs, living around the globe with advanced education from world class universities and with intimate knowledge of rural as well as urban needs of Nepal, could be mobilized to create knowledge network where they do not have to give-up their place, career, and personal-wealth in participating in this endeavour. Further, international donors can assist the rural poor to own the laptops as are being created by MIT, and which are being funded by UN agencies to help students in the least developed countries.

4. Academic Development

Traditionally, education in Nepal has been based on memorization of lessons and rote learning, borrowed from the 19th century Britain and India. This type of conventional teaching has

neither succeeded in its goal of teaching well the theoretical principles, nor has it been able to help the students develop practical skills that are useful in real life. The currently available vocational and employment-friendly programs, like engineering and medicine, are generally affordable only to the rich and upper middle class. This situation has created a need for an inexpensive but internationally recognized quality education, particularly in professional fields, and which is within the reach of the masses.

Those NRNs who possess an intimate knowledge of education system of both Nepal and the outside world are well positioned to help Nepal in this regard.

A mechanism of delivering multi-disciplinary education can help the graduates in the rural area act as civil, mechanical, or electrical engineer, economist, banker, entrepreneur, and environmental scientists to build critical rural infrastructure locally. For instance, the graduates of the proposed Open University should be able to team up and build a 10 Kilo-watt power plant right where they live and work. Similar needs exist in the areas of health, agriculture, and natural sciences.

The following disciplines and subject matters can become the initial academic programs of the OUN.

1. Education, distance education and early childhood education,
2. Health sciences, health administration and management,
3. Engineering sciences, information, and technology,
4. Planning, administration and management of rural economy and institutions,
5. Agriculture, environment and sustainable development,
6. Entrepreneurship, collaboration, and business development,
7. Mathematics, natural sciences, social sciences and philosophy.

5. Getting There - A Business and Management Plan:

The core proponent team is currently exploring all frontiers to learn how to provide technical and financial support to Nepal in establishing an OUN. The following four areas are critical in this regard:

- I. ***Content Production:*** The proponent team has carefully reviewed the remarkable advancement made by a successful institution, Athabasca University in Canada, in developing curricular contents that are highly suited for distance learning, and the long experience it has accumulated in repeating that success. The team is interested in realizing how the talented NRN teachers could translate their knowledge into distance

learning contents. Technical assistance will be needed in translating knowledge contributions into learning modules and programs.

- II. ***Making Learning Affordable:*** Many institutions are able to produce successful outcomes in educating working professionals while keeping the programs affordable to the learners. They are achieving this by collaborating and partnering with employers in subsidising the learning programs through innovative programs that are beneficial to the university and employers. This model would prove most suited to Nepal's situation to prepare underemployed rural, remote and marginalized youth for potential careers in teaching, government and private sector jobs locally. The proposed Open University can benefit from financial help from potential employers. Many internationally funded rural development projects in Nepal send a large number of their employees annually abroad for in-service education and training. This potential resource can be kept inside the country, if a quality and affordable education can be provided for their project employees locally.

- III. ***Helping Students Obtain Remote Learning Tools and Technologies:*** OUN students will need computers and access to internet, and electrical power at home or in convenient locations to make remote learning possible. International financial support from the UN and other international agencies should be mobilized to help the potential students get resources to access the distance learning modules. However, through university endowments and local investments, it should be possible to generate enough resources to make such programs sustainable beyond the initial international support.

- IV. ***International Assistance and Funding:*** Considering that the immediate prospect for developing such institution solely from internal resources of Nepal is limited, OUN needs to generate assistance from international community, such as UN, multilateral, and bi-lateral agencies and private foundations. OUN can benefit from NRN community, and public and private sectors in Nepal. OUN can create a Global Public and Private Partnership (GPPP) program with interested agencies which can support in content and program development, and also in business development aspects of institution building. Many in the Diaspora are well placed to mobilize international funding for the various component of the OUN. A strong and unyielding support from GON and local partners will be a key ingredient to enable the proponents of this university to more effectively organize international resources for this cause.

- V. **Developing a University Governance Framework:** The modality of the proposed Open University is likely to be inter-jurisdictional having affiliated units within and beyond Nepal's borders. For example, some Diaspora groups may be its teachers and program developers. The governance system of the proposed OUN will have considerable complexities. Serious deliberations are needed to develop the governance framework of such an institution. Another question is how to advance research and innovation in the OUN without compromising the objectives of creating a building a village-oriented, affordable, and applied program. OUN needs to review successful models in developing the framework of governance.

7. Conclusions

The rural and other marginalized people in Nepal, and particularly women and *Dalits*, face serious barriers to higher education. This not only has compromised the well being of the affected individuals and limited the potentials of the disadvantaged communities, but also has seriously hindered the efforts of Nepali government to promote socio-economic development.

NRNA and CFFN seek to support the establishment of an Open University in Nepal that will greatly enhance the access to higher education for the rural and marginalized people of Nepal. This initiative seeks to capitalize the opportunity created by Nepal Government's own plan to establish such a university. Thus, basic demand analysis, political and educational need assessment, and national priorities have already been made by the government, and a need is well established for the creation of such an institution. As the Nepali Diaspora has also reached a critical mass of well educated, resourceful and interested individuals for such an endeavour, this proposed program by Canada based CFFN and global NRNA is timely and the goals are achievable.

This proposal needs a strong collaboration among the interested NRNs, Nepali Government, world-class open universities and international funding organizations. The initial proponent team consisting of NRNs from Canada, USA and Australia will attempt to mobilize the wider NRN community to support this vision. Through the Knowledge, Skills and Innovation Exchange (SKIE) task force, this initiative has already been endorsed by NRNA.

The proponent core team is seeking to build a collaborative platform and mobilize initial financial, technical, educational and human resources to take this program forward.

Please visit an informational website <http://openu.cffn.ca> that is currently evolving and learn more about our mission. The proponents look forward to having cooperation and participation from many generous individuals and institutions for educating rural and marginalized people of Nepal.

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