

Community Perspective Towards Higher Education in Nepal: A Study of Needs and Expectations

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Abstract

This paper reports a study undertaken to address the concern of relevance of higher education in Nepal, with a view to dig out the community needs, aspirations, expectations, and the factors affecting people's access to higher education - based on the data collected from 385 household heads and members residing in the communities located in the service areas of 14 colleges belonging to five universities of the country; and the communities include 14 ethnicities categorized under 4 ethnic groups and an additional 'others' group. An interview schedule was administered for data collection from the households; and the responses were gathered for analysis. Regarding the community needs, it was found that people primarily realize the importance of academic streams of knowledge, followed by the techno-vocational and ethno-indigenous knowledge. For the purpose of educating their children at higher level, however, people have a tendency of lower preference towards the ethno-indigenous knowledge compared to the remaining two streams. While the individual and family-related factors are found as the main obstacles (affecting factors) towards their children's access to higher education, they tend to have expectations from the community and colleges for support to increase the access in various ways.

Keywords: Community perspective, higher education, needs, aspiration, expectation

Introduction

Higher education in Nepal seems to have a short history when we see its beginning dated back to the establishment of Tri-Chandra College (1918), and later developments including College of Education (1956) and Tribhuvan University (TU) (1959) (MoE, 2010; Baral, 2016). In the beginning, the

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influence of Indian universities was seen in the philosophical orientation and contents of study in Nepali higher education – as the colleges opened in the country prior to the establishment of TU (including Tri-Chandra College) were then affiliated to the Indian universities and accordingly their courses were offered in the colleges (Subba, 2019). With this influence, the tendency of dependence on foreign-based content matter seems to have been continued in several subjects of study at higher level in the country.

Despite the dramatic proliferation of higher educational institutions over the last two decades in the country (with 11 universities comprising 1437 campuses and 4 medical academies holding altogether 466, 828 students) (UGC, 2020), there are several issues and challenges in this sector – including those associated with access, equity, quality and relevance. When participation in higher education is considered from the point of view of economic strata, it has been found that people from the highest quintiles have immensely greater share in university education while the participation from the lowest quintiles has a negligible share in it (with 88% and 1% share respectively) (UGC & UNESCO Office Kathmandu, 2007). From ethnicity perspective, the share of Brahmin-Chhetris is found drastically higher than Janajatis, Dalits and others (ibid.)

It is often pointed out that there are confusions at national level “as to what the higher education policy is” (Upadhyay, 2018). As a consequence, considering education from the point of view of relevance, works have been rare in the country towards identifying the national needs in higher education; and in many cases courses are offered as per the respective faculties’ “personal likes, dislikes, interests or experience” (Baral, n.d.). Besides, community needs and aspirations have rarely been studied with importance to derive feedback for curriculum development in higher education in particular. In this context, a study was undertaken with a view to address this concern; accordingly, the findings regarding community needs, people’s aspirations as well as the factors affecting higher education access have closely been studied and reported herein.

Methodology

The study was based on a household survey conducted in the communities throughout the country. This section briefly presents the methodological frame and procedures adopted in conducting the research on which the write up is based. Accordingly, the sub-headings below will describe the relevant points.

Study area: The data were collected from the service areas of altogether 14 colleges (located in the respective 14 districts in the 7 Provinces of the country) belonging to Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu University, Pokhara University, Mid-Western University and Far-Western University. The service areas included the residential communities of Rai, Limbu,

Yadav, Tarai Dalit, Jirel, Tamang, Newar (including Dalits and non-Dalits), Gurung, Pahadi Dalit, Magar, Muslim, Brahmin-Chhetri, and Tharu.

Determination of sample size: Altogether 385 household members from the community were sampled for the study. This sample size was decided according to Cochran's (1977, as referred by Uakarn and others, 2021) idea that is usually considered to be the minimum standard for appropriate sample size in the case of survey studies from a large population. The distribution of the sample population in terms of the respective communities is presented below in Table 1.

Sampling procedure: The study followed cross-sectional design for data collection; and accordingly quantitative data were collected from the communities regarding their needs, aspirations for higher education, and the obstacles for access to higher education. The sample respondents in this study were drawn on random basis from the respective communities.

Table 1: Sample distribution by community from respective districts

<i>Community</i>			<i>Districts</i>
<i>Ethnicities</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percent</i>	
Brahmin/Chhetri	51	13.2	Aacham (25), Surkhet (26)
Limbu	28	7.3	Dhankuta
Jirel	24	6.2	Dolakha
Tamang	26	6.8	Dolakha
Tharu	28	7.3	Kanchanpur
Muslim	30	7.8	Kapilvastu
Gurung	24	6.2	Kaski
Newar Dalit	25	6.5	Kathmandu
Newar (Non-Dalit)	24	6.2	Lalitpur
Yadav	25	6.5	Rautahat
Magar	25	6.5	Rolpa
Pahadi dalit	24	6.2	Rukum
Rai	25	6.5	Sankhuwashabha
Tarai dalit	26	6.8	Saptari
Total	385	100.0	

Instrumentation: An interview schedule was developed and administered to collect the data from the households which were considered as the basic unit of the study. This tool was used to collect the perceptions of the respondents for educating their children concerning higher educational needs and aspirations. Regarding the respondents' needs, aspirations, the factors affecting opportunities of higher education and the expectations for

addressing the access-related issues, the questionnaire had provisioned for multiple responses on a stem if applicable and desired by the respondent. Thus, on a stem, a respondent could give more than one response.

Data collection procedure: The selected communities belonging to the various ethnicities given above were visited by the researchers to conduct the household survey. The household heads or anyone available thereby were briefed about the purpose of the visit and their consent was sought for data collection.

Data analysis procedure: Based on the data accumulated from the survey conducted in the respective communities, the households were classified into three socio-economic categories – namely ‘very poor’, ‘poor’, and ‘middle-class’. This was done considering their land ownership in combination with occupations, sources of income, educational status and types of house buildings, as described in the points below. (Representation of the respondents in the total sample of the study is presented in Table 3.)

- a) *Category I (very poor)*, which includes the landless labourers, marginal cultivators, petty businesspersons, self-employed persons, low paid service holders. These people live in tin-roofed huts; are using the simple pit latrine; using open drinking water; and majority of them are illiterate or just literate.
- b) *Category II (Poor)*, which consists of the households having non-irrigated or unfertile land (up to 9 *kathhas*) near jungle or river bank, having food crops to consume for 6 months, living in tin/tile-roofed huts or congested houses, using simple pit latrine, lacking several amenities, marginal cultivators, self-employed, or owners of petty business/ service.
- c) *Category III (Middle-class)*, who are the owners of 10-19 *kathhas* of land, having the food crops to consume for up to 12 months from their own land which is fertile and irrigated. Some of them are also engaged in white-collar jobs (government or private), small business in the local weekly *haat-bazar*, small scale industries. Most of them are educated up to or above secondary school level.

In addition, the sample population belonging to the various ethnicities shown in Table 1 was re-categorized into five groups (Brahmin-Chhetris, *Janajati*, Dalit, Muslim and ‘Others’). The multiple responses to a stem were considered separately for data analysis; and analyzed in the form of multi-response tabulation (where the percentage value for each response category was calculated on the basis of the total number of respondents, not necessarily the sum total of responses).

Result

After the analysis of data following the procedure mentioned above, they are tabulated and displayed accordingly, as given below.

Respondent individual characteristics

Considering the individual (demographic and other personal attributes) characteristics of the sample population, the respondents are re-categorized as presented in Table 2 – which demonstrates the number and percentage of the respondents belonging to various categories.

Table 2: Distribution of respondents by their individual characteristics

Individual characteristics	Number	Percent
Sex		
Female	48	12.5
Male	337	87.5
Religion		
Hindu	271	70.4
Buddhist	68	17.7
Christian	16	4.2
Islam	30	7.8
Caste/Ethnicity		
Brahmin/Chhetri	53	13.8
<i>Janajati</i>	214	55.6
Dalit	63	16.4
Muslim	30	7.8
Others	25	6.5
Educational Status		
Illiterate	81	21.0
Literate but not schooling	68	17.7
Basic Level	107	27.8
Secondary Level	98	25.5
Bahelors Level	23	6.0
Masters Level	8	2.1
Occupation		
Agriculture	125	32.5
Service	108	28.1
Business	36	9.4
Daily wages	82	21.3
Foreign employment	7	1.8
Others (Traditional and Technical Skills)	13	3.4
Unemployed	14	3.6
Total	385	100.0

As depicted in the table, there is a domination of males over females in the sex category, Hindus over the other groups considering the religion, and *Janajati* regarding the caste/ethnicity. Regarding the educational status, more than half of the respondents had completed at least the Basic level of education; and more than one-fourth of them completed the secondary level. When occupation was considered, nearly one-third of them were engaged in agricultural works, followed by service (28.1%) and daily wages (21.3%).

Respondent household characteristics

Based on the data, the households were re-categorized into various types considering the types of the house (building), land ownership, and the economic category of the families – as presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Distribution of respondents by their household characteristics

Household characteristics	Number	Percent
Types of houses		
No house	38	9.9
<i>Kachhi</i> ¹	127	33.0
<i>Ardha Pakki</i> ²	71	18.4
<i>Pakki</i> ³	149	38.7
Land ownership (for crop production)⁴		
No land	128	33.2
1-9 <i>Katthas</i>	96	24.9
10-19 <i>Katthas</i>	49	12.7
20 <i>Katthas</i> or more	112	29.1
Economic status		
Category I (Very poor)	39	10.1
Category II (Poor)	200	51.9
Category III (Middle class)	146	37.9
Total	385	100.0
1: <i>Kachchi</i> (made by non-durable materials like wood, bamboo, straw/thatch, mud, raw bricks etc. which are mainly used in both wall and roof); 2: <i>Ardha Pakki</i> (either wall or roof of house is made with permanent materials and others are made with temporary materials); 3: <i>Pakki</i> (both walls and roof are made of permanent construction materials like cement, brick, stone, slate, tile and galvanized sheet) (based on the classification by Kunwar, 2014) 4: The land-related data collected from the Hillside and Mountain areas was converted into <i>Kattha</i> from the original unit of land that was earlier recorded in <i>Ropani</i> , and presented accordingly. (1 <i>Kattha</i> = 338.63 square meter; 1 <i>Ropani</i> = 508.74 square meter)		

Thus, one-third of respondents are residing in *Kachhi* houses, around thirty-nine percent of them have *Pakki* houses; while about ten percent of them do not have their own house. Regarding land ownership, one-third of them do not have land for crop production; while about 29% of them have at least twenty *Katthas* of land for crop production. Regarding the economic status, more than half of the respondents are poor; around 38% are in middle class, and the rest are very poor.

Needs for higher education

The community needs for higher education were identified on the basis of the respondents’ remarks collected from the field. Then the needs they pointed out were grouped under the categories of ‘academic’, ‘technical and vocational’ and ‘indigenous’ knowledge/skills, as presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Respondents’ needs (in terms of stream of study) for higher education

	<i>Academic (%)</i>	<i>Technical & vocational (%)</i>	<i>Indigenous knowledge, skill, & languages (%)</i>	<i>Total (N)</i>
<i>Economic Category</i>				
Category I	64.0	40.0	32.0	25
Category II	77.3	44.3	45.4	97
Category III	80.5	48.1	41.6	77
<i>Caste/Ethnicity</i>				
Brahmin/Chhetri	71.9	53.1	59.4	32
<i>Janajati</i>	77.6	46.7	39.3	107
Dalit	92.1	57.9	31.6	38
Muslim	27.3	0.0	72.7	11
Others	81.8	9.1	27.3	11
Total	76.9	45.2	42.2	199
(Non-response: 186)				

Overall, more than three-fourth of the respondents from the community seem to be emphasizing the need for academic learning. To be a bit more explicit, they have expressed the need for academic subjects including Business, Account, Economics, Social Work, Engineering, Moral Education, Management, Math, Science, Health Education, Computer Science and ICT, Agriculture, Forestry, Population Studies, Social Work, Medical Science, etc.

In addition, the second priority of respondents has been the ‘technical or vocational’ learning, chosen by about two-fifth of them. Their choice include the subjects related to specific professional competence such as factory related work skills, mechanical training, automobile work skills, modern technology skills

such as electricity, mobile phone, agriculture technology, plumbing knowledge and skill, fashion designing, hotel management, etc.

The respondents' preference for 'indigenous knowledge and skills' looks similar to that in the case of 'technical or vocational' learning. Examples include the subject matters that particularly deserve local importance such as fine arts, handicrafts, carpentry, mason works, tailoring, herbal plant-related knowledge, local language preservation, *allo* and *dhaka* clothes, and orange juice, *doko-namlo*, *radi pakhi*, etc.

Thus, as the figures depicted in the table above indicate, the respondents have preferred academic learning more than the remaining two streams; and this trend is noticed in the case of respondents from all the economic categories included in this study – the 'very poor', 'poor', and 'middle class'. Ethnicity-wise, the domination of academic preference is noticed among the Brahmin-Chhetris, *Janajatis* as well as Dalits.

Aspirations for educating their children at higher level

The aspirations of the community for educating their children at higher level were recognized based on the remarks given by the respondents from the field. The data collected as such were then grouped into the categories of 'academic', 'technical and vocational' and 'indigenous' knowledge/skills – which is depicted in Table 5.

Table 5: Respondents' aspirations for educating children at higher level

	<i>Academic (%)</i>	<i>Technical & vocational (%)</i>	<i>Indigenous knowledge and skill (%)</i>	<i>Total (N)</i>
<i>Economic Category</i>				
Category I	73.1	15.4	30.8	26
Category II	83.1	34.9	21.7	83
Category III	86.3	53.4	9.6	73
<i>Caste/Ethnicity</i>				
Brahmin/Chhetri	92.6	48.1	0.0	27
<i>Janajati</i>	80.4	45.1	18.6	102
Dalit	100.0	28.6	2.9	35
Muslim	20.0	20.0	80.0	10
Others	87.5	12.5	62.5	8
<i>Total</i>	<i>83.0</i>	<i>39.6</i>	<i>18.1</i>	<i>182</i>
(Non-response: 203)				

When the responses are observed in the aggregate, the respondents' preference on academic learning is highly prevalent (with more than four-fifth of the respondents opting for it). The areas of academic study they aspire for their

offsprings in higher education include: Agriculture, Veterinary science, medical science, English, Math, ICT, Engineering, natural Science, Management, Education, Moral education, Law, Economics, Auravedic, Pilot, Environment science.

Besides academic studies, the technical and vocational learning has been chosen for the higher education of children by nearly two-fifth of the respondents. In this stream, they have opted for Life skill education and vocational as well as Technical education of various kinds.

Compared to these two streams, the respondents' preference on indigenous knowledge and skills is meagre – with less than one-fifth of them opting for this stream. Their particular concern includes the languages like Nepali, Urdu, as well as Sports, Tailoring, Local skill.

Table 6: Respondents' perception on the factors affecting higher education opportunities

	<i>Individual & family (%)</i>	<i>Community & campus (%)</i>	<i>National Policy (%)</i>	<i>Total (N)</i>
<i>Economic Category</i>				
Category I	74.2	9.7	51.6	31
Category II	83.8	10.8	37.8	74
Category III	74.5	21.3	27.7	47
<i>Caste/Ethnicity</i>				
Brahmin/Chhetri	37.5	75.0	0.0	8
<i>Janajati</i>	76.0	5.3	36.0	75
Dalit	100.0	2.3	20.9	43
Muslim	94.4	38.9	77.8	18
Others	0.0	37.5	87.5	8
<i>Total</i>	<i>78.9</i>	<i>13.8</i>	<i>37.5</i>	<i>152</i>
<i>(Nonresponse: 233)</i>				

Regarding the factors affecting the opportunities for higher education, individual (personal) and family-related factors have been most prominent for almost four-fifth of the respondents. In this connection, they have pointed out the factors including household poverty, lack of their self-awareness, illiterate family, early marriage and early motherhood, responsibility of child rearing at home, lack of personal interest, lack of aptitude in education, lack of scholarship opportunities, unemployment, and low wage, poor level of parental awareness, single family members as the source of earning, geographical difficulties, etc.

Community perspective towards higher education in Nepal: A study of needs and expectations

Moreover, factors related to national policy have also been responsible in this regard for more than one-third of the respondents. The participants have shown the factors playing role in it, including: poor economic condition of the nation, lack of provision of employment opportunities, poor support from the government and lack of awareness of the government agencies regarding higher education, lack of sufficient scholarship programs, lack of support from local Government, scarcity of job opportunity, etc.

A small number of respondents (13.8%) have even pointed out the factors related to community and college that have affected higher education opportunities. They mention the factors such as lack of scholarship programs in the educational institutions, conservative society, poverty in the community, lack of community awareness, weak student entry in campuses, untrained teachers, lack of accommodation facilities (e.g. hostels), high cost of higher education, etc.

Overall, respondents from each of the economic categories have highlighted the individual and family related factors to be more dominant than those associated with the national policy. And, the role of community and college related factors are found the least influential ones. Considering the caste/ethnicity of the respondents, the dominance of individual and family-related factors is clearly notable among Janajatis, Dalits and Muslim.

Table 8: Respondents' expectations from various agencies for increasing access to higher education

	<i>Individual & family (%)</i>	<i>Community & campus (%)</i>	<i>National Policy & State Level (%)</i>	<i>Total (N)</i>
<i>Economic Category</i>				
Category I	39.3	71.4	17.9	28
Category II	41.8	81.6	5.1	98
Category III	34.3	76.1	9.0	67
<i>Caste/Ethnicity</i>				
Brahmin/Chhetri	45.0	70.0	15.0	20
Janajati	33.3	74.7	9.1	99
Dalit	56.3	95.8	0.0	48
Muslim	0.0	100.0	0.0	16
Others	60.0	10.0	40.0	10
<i>Total</i>	38.9	78.2	8.3	193
(Non-response: 192)				

The respondents have expressed various expectations from the family (including the individuals themselves), community and colleges, and from

national policy and state level – with a view to increasing the access to higher education. On the aggregate, their expectations from the community and college are more prominent (nearly four-fifth of them indicating this expectation) than those from the individual/family or national policy level. The important expectations from the community and college include: Sustained financial support to the campuses, awareness programs at community level, scholarship in higher education, poverty alleviation programs, technical education, programs for improving economic condition of the community, financial support for poor community students in education, awareness campaigns for reduction in child marriage at community level, provision for student feedback in campuses, enhancement in educational quality at campus level, programs for controlling of unemployment through the provision of earning and learning, focus on Public Service Commission, etc.

The respondents belonging to each of the three economic categories have stated the expectations in more or less similar way. When the data are considered from caste/ethnicity perspective, expectations from the community and college are more eminently noticed among the respondents belonging to Brahmin/Chhetri, Janajati, Dalit as well as Muslim groups.

Discussion

As the perceived needs expressed by the people, the academic subject matter has been mostly prioritized followed by the techno-vocational matters and indigenous knowledge and skills. Despite recognizing the need for indigenous knowledge and skills in the community, this area of knowledge seems to have been the least priority for them in educating the children at higher level.

Some ground realities must have been associated with the lack of attraction towards indigenous subject matter among the people. First and foremost, since the learning of indigenous knowledge and skills are found overlooked in the prevailing higher education curricula – to the extent, sometimes, of “detaching” the new generation from such “organic” learning contents (Acharya and Devkota, n.d.), there are rare chances of getting opportunity for the new generation to get education at higher level with specialization in such fields of knowledge. Knowing this reality, it seems the community people are not so convinced that it would be possible for their children to get educated in such areas of knowledge at higher level. Secondly, with the feeling of inferiority in society, the new generations are even found hesitating to apply the skills and knowledge associated with the traditional occupations, under the influence of the modern technology-based market and society – resulting into the reduced attraction among them towards indigenous subject matter.

As the obstacles towards accessing higher education, individual and family-related factors are identified to be more influential than other ones, compared to the factors related to college, community or the government. This shows the indication that the factors outside the family are not so particularly strong in creating obstacles towards the higher education. The families have various needs, and educating the children at higher level is just one of them, for which the parents' income is limited – resulting into obstacles for access. It would be worthwhile, in this connection, to remember that particularly the students from rural areas and disadvantaged groups have faced the problem due to the lack of information about the scholarship by the government as well (Subba, 2019).

In this connection, people have expectations from the agencies outside the family for facilitating them towards the access to higher education. They consider the community and campus to be the agencies that could play a supporting role for facilitating them towards increasing the access through various means including scholarship, or opportunities for income generation. It seems they have understood that the problems related to their access towards higher education can be addressed if the institution which is offering higher education takes some concrete initiation towards this direction.

Concluding remarks

The present study gives a clear indication that academic streams of higher education are the preferred areas perceived as the needs of the people in the community. Despite the importance of the ethno-indigenous sources of knowledge in society, people do not yet seem to be in a comfortable position to favor the indigenous knowledge and skills for the purpose of educating their children at higher level. But techno-vocational knowledge and skills are favoured by the people for the higher education of their new generations. Some new initiatives could be relevant in establishing the importance of indigenous knowledge in society, and gradually upgrading it towards higher education.

The present study was limited to the responses of the middle class and poor class members of the community, so the data derived from them may not necessarily depict the needs and aspirations of the people belonging to upper class families. Thus, the findings from the study are to be understood with this consideration, though the middle and poor sections constitutes the majority of the country's population, so these findings seem to be applicable for a considerably large section of the society. There is a scope of further research replicating this study with the representation of households from all the socio-economic strata in the country.

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