

Address by The Vice-Chancellor, Royal University of Bhutan, at the Panel discussion at RTC on 21st Century Bhutanese Graduates, July 5, 2022

Hon'ble Vice Chancellor, Nidup Dorji

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I thank the organizers for the opportunity to participate in this panel discussion on 21st century Bhutanese Graduates.

The Royal University of Bhutan has existed for almost 20 years and as good universities which have been around for centuries have, we also stand to serve as:

- engines of social mobility
- drivers of the economy
- guardians of our culture
- foundations of democracy
- generators of new ideas

Article 2 of the Royal Charter for the Royal University of Bhutan spells out that the overall objective of the University shall be to provide, through the dissemination of knowledge and the advancement of learning and the granting of awards, for the economic and cultural development of the Kingdom of Bhutan and to promote the cultural enrichment, personal development, and well-being of our people.

Section B5 of the Wheel of Academic Law lists the expectations of RUB Graduates as:

- general academic, intellectual, personal and communication skills;
- the possession of general academic skills such as critical reasoning, analysis, evaluation, creativity etc.;
- an awareness of the contexts, boundaries, and limits of the subject matter studied;
- the possession of self-motivated study skills and the readiness to pursue lifelong learning;
- an understanding of and ability to undertake one's own personal development such as self-reflection and self-criticism, intellectual maturity etc.;
- interpersonal skills and awareness such as leadership, negotiation, networking, able to work in teams etc.;
- communication and presentation skills;
- information literacy; and
- personal development and personal illumination such as sense of service, moral responsibility etc.

These are the expectations (many of which are termed as soft skills, or traversal, or transferrable skills) from the graduates and the big question is: have we been able to fulfil these?

The answer is 'yes' and 'no'. 'Yes', because we have produced thousands of very competent and capable graduates who today are doing extremely well in their lives and shouldering important responsibilities in the public as well as private sectors. At the same time

the answer is 'no', because there are also many graduates who have not even been able to get gainful employment. This could be true of many educational institutes, all of which strive to make every single one of its students successful, but the reality is this is rarely true due to so many factors.

So what should the aspirations of the University be? The debate surrounding the purpose of university education whether it should educate students for life or livelihood will not go away for some time but I believe that:

- Investing in the skills and systems to support them with a learning focused on developing an adaptive mind-set should be a top priority.
- Apart from the domain knowledge that students acquire, university education should help individuals to hone their thinking and analytical skills, give them confidence, and the ability to re-skill as life changes.

One of the biggest challenges that we are facing today is how the education that we provide to the youth stays relevant as they face the future. What we know for sure is that the future is going to be drastically different and that will be mainly driven by emerging technologies.

The Royal Khasho on Education Reforms mentions "...Educationists and experts have identified what 21st century competencies mean for our children everywhere...We must prioritize self-discovery and exploration, and involve learners in the creation of knowledge rather than making them mere consumers of it..."

So what is of paramount importance is to acquire valuable skill sets to function in a highly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (in short, a VUCA) world. The focus should be on hands-on learning with real world applications that helps students develop a variety of skill sets, including creativity, media and technology literacy, productivity, social skills, communication skills, flexibility, and initiative. Other skills attained include problem-solving, critical thinking, curiosity, decision making, leadership, entrepreneurship, acceptance of failure, resilience, and more. It is, therefore, important to prioritize hands-on experience and real-world applications necessary to developing an innovative mind. I believe that these should be emphasis on these in any programme of study.

Because of the explosion of new things, new markets will emerge which will require a new set of skills for employment. Increasingly smart robots will take over some jobs, and jobs which didn't exist before will be in demand.

The workplace of the future, whatever that may ultimately look like, will inevitably be driven by people and fuelled by digital technology amongst which AI, automation, and robotics will most shape the future of work. Automation will allow workers to focus more on important tasks such as solving problems, designing products, and interpreting data.

It is estimated that the demand for people with technological, social, and emotional and higher cognitive skills will rise manifold by 2030. The skills valued by employers are the soft skills that were mentioned earlier in addition to adaptability, culture fit, and growth potential for in-demand technical skills e.g., Design Thinking, Analytics, and Cloud Computing. Given that technology keeps advancing and evolving rapidly, one needs to be continuously learning new skills—in other words we have to always learn, unlearn, and relearn throughout our lives. Learnability which is defined as being curious and having a hungry mind for new things is now considered a huge asset and seen as a key indicator for career potential.

There is no doubt at all that we need to incorporate future-focused thinking in our strategic plans and adopt trends that can provide the greatest impact.

If we look at the trends in education, they are:

1. Soft skills: in addition to what I mentioned earlier, we need to prepare our students to work in teams, demonstrate strong leadership, and possess the ability to thrive in diverse cultural and social settings.
2. Reinventing the learning experience: we must realize that learning has now become less about acquiring information or submitting to another's ideas or views but it is about finding one's own voice and exchanging ideas with others. Today students want to be in charge of their own learning and increasingly want to be able to transition between structured and unstructured learning modes facilitated by digital content and modalities. This trend calls for redefining the roles of the Professor and a shift in attitudes as well as cultural values. In short, we should be able to provide the best learning experience for students to allow them to identify where they can best use their talents and interests.
3. Internationalization and collaboration are important for improving overall quality of education and preparing students for the global world. Students seek internationalization experiences and employers want workers with international experiences.
4. Lifelong learning: as pointed out earlier, the rapidly changing world of work require continuous education which is also important for pursuing personal growth.
5. Future is technology-driven: there is no doubt that the technological advancements will revolutionize the way we think, how we teach, how our students learn, and the transformation of the learning process in a digitized world. This offers the opportunity to view higher education as a lifelong pursuit rather than a degree-driven activity.
6. Values education: Amidst the technological advancements and the constant changes, it is crucial for us to root our children's education in our core value system which defines us and bind us as Bhutanese. As C.S. Lewis said, "Education without values, as useful as it is, seems rather to make a man a more clever devil." Values education includes developing the appropriate sensibilities: moral, cultural, spiritual, and the ability to make value judgments and internalize them in one's life. Further, there is no doubt that people are going to be stressed more and more due to the fast pace of life and all the distractions. So it is important to integrate mindfulness in the curriculum to counter the overwhelming levels of anxiety and distraction for students to stay focused and to being present.

Finally, I would like to say that today's students have a lot of advantages, which older generations did not have. Most importantly they have technology at their disposal to do anything and they must always be ready to harness the potential offered by technology. They must also learn to use this power and the knowledge that they get to improve the lives of people around them and the world.

I end with this message for our students in schools and colleges: "From those to whom much is given, much is expected"; so give your best in life.

Thank you.