

Text transcript: An interview with Jeevan Khanal

Info: Welcome to this podcast series on solving the global learning crisis. We will discover how Ethiopia, Nepal and Mozambique are reshaping their higher education programs in response to the changing demands of the 21st century.

Eila: Hello, I am Eila Burns from the School of Professional Teacher Education at JAMK University of Applied Sciences, Finland. Today we focus on Nepal and talk about the challenges that Open University Nepal faced when they implemented online learning.

We will discuss this interesting topic with Doctor Jeevan Khanal. Welcome Jeevan.

Jeevan: Thank you Eila, thank you.

Eila: And, namaste.

Jeevan: Namaste. Thank you so much for giving me this opportunity.

Eila: Jeevan, would you tell our listeners briefly, who you are? What do you do in Nepal please?

Jeevan: OK, my name is Jeevan Khanal. I'm assistant professor in the Nepal Open University. I have completed my PhD in the South Korea and returned to the Nepal in 2018, and from 2018 till now I'm working for the Nepal Open University. I'm a project coordinator, the 21st century skills project which is supported by the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

We have partners from different Universities in Finland like JAMK and HAMK, and two universities in Nepal, Tribhuvan University and Nepal Open University.

Eila: Excellent thank you. Thank you very much, Jeevan. Jeevan you wrote an interesting article of the challenges faced in implementing open learning at Open University of Nepal. This article has been very recently published in the Open Learning the Journal of Open distance and e-learning. So, when we talk about online learning, it can mean quite many things, for example blended or MOOCs. Can you briefly tell us what context was this online learning article placed on?

Jeevan: OK, this the article is totally based on Nepal Open University and is a case it. Nepal Open University probably is one of the youngest Universities of the South Asia because it has initiated its degree from 2008. I have seen so many challenges and I have seen this so many strays to the educational leader administrators here. That's why I decided to find out what challenges they are facing. I have looked at these challenges under the four frameworks by Bolman and Deal.

Eila: OK. Yes, you used the particular framework to look at this. At the beginning of the article, you said that the article is unique in many ways. Can you tell us why is it unique?

Jeevan: The first, this is the first research article of the study based on the Nepal Open University. Number two, it is unique because most of the articles of online and distance learning are published from the advanced countries. I think 87% of the articles are occupied by the United States, United Kingdom, China, and other developed countries. This article is just about the initial phase of the Open University. What challenge did they face in the initial phase?

So, it's very important to know the initial phase when we are establishing other higher education institutions. Also, so it gives more information to the other scholars and the administration who want to start a new university in Nepal and the other developing countries, which have similar context to Nepal. And another is that this article gives information to scholars around the world of the developing or less developed countries' contexts.

That's why I think it's important.

Eila: It definitely is very, very important. Can you also tell us a little bit about how you conduct this study?

Jeevan: Yeah. I followed the interview because no one can see the feelings, attitudes and experiences that hurdles from outside. So, it depended on the semi-structured interviews with many follow up questions. I tried to capture the real situation, scenario, difficulties and challenges they are facing in Nepal Open University.

That's why I have interviewed administrators, vice chancellor, dean, registrar, students as well as teachers. So, all the stakeholders are involved here.

Eila: That's excellent. Now the interesting bit? What were the main findings? What did you find? Can you please tell us that?

Jeevan: Yeah, I have seen so many articles related to open and distance learning and leadership challenges. But I haven't seen the articles related to the challenges considered within these four frameworks, so I decided to conduct this study.

So, there are four frameworks, structural framework, human resource framework, political framework, and symbolic framework. I have seen the challenges within all these four frameworks.

What I have seen as the challenges here in the Nepal Open University are the same challenges which other Universities of Nepal are facing. Mainly, because the leaders are appointed by the government and the mostly by the political party who hold the government. They want the leaders who favor them. The same case is seen here in the Nepal Open University.

The leaders of the Nepal Open universities are well aware of the political situation, political interfere and they try to keep it neutral, and they try to make it more functional. We have seen that there are some respondents that one no, but there are leaders who are well aware of the political intervention. So, they try to keep it neutral.

Another point is that the university act is passed by the government and it decides to open the University, but they don't have the resources. They don't have the building, they don't have the land where to establish it. It's a quite difficult situation.

They have facing so many challenges under the structural framework like budgeting, strategy, and plans. These types of the problems they were facing.

Within the human resource framework, it comes under issues how to hire people for the faculties. What a professional development program should be? They have the faculty members for the traditional system. They were unable to initiate a new hiring system, which is practiced around the world and which may be better alternative to cast young talented people.

Still, they hire the faculty members so that they sit in the written examination. And when the answers are checked and calculated and based on these numbers, the faculty members are hired, so it creates other problems. Teachers who are hired are not familiar with online teaching because they come from the traditional university system. And they need professional development training. Nepal Open University tries to give them some training, but that is not sufficient.

And within the political frames there are so many hidden conflicting interests. So within the political frameworks I found conflicting interests between the public and private universities, because you know, they are able to attract large number of intakes although they are not able to provide the admission to all of them due to the different difficulties.

But what I have seen that the private universities, which is called here Community University, some community and private colleges, they took the Nepal Open University as a to say that it will prevent their business, because when people can learn online from home, they don't get more students in rural areas for private institutions. One of the Deans and few faculty members tried to explain it. There was a conflicting interest among the public and private or community University.

Finally, at the symbolic framework, the open and distance learning is still not trusted learning in Nepal. That is because the philosophy of learning comes from the Gurukulam education. Gurukulam education means that teachers have a very high-power relationship over the students. They are not democratic. So, the open and online education is not trusted, that's why the Open University decided to follow the blended learning.

Blended learning means it is a fusion of traditional and the modern system. In blended learning also I found the new practices for students. They sit 3 hours in the class and attendance is notified. So, we are blending, some students have 20% face to face classes and 80% online classes.

Another problem is that Nepal Open was unable to keep itself open, because the students who want to enroll in the Nepal Open University have to sit entrance exam. The ones who get the highest marks are able to attend here and the remaining had to wait for the next semester to sit exam again. This is poorly, and why I'm saying it as I am a part of Nepal Open University and it is not able to admit all the students, which is the great issue for equity and access.

Thank you.

Eila: Wow, that's very, very interesting. You really have looked at this issue from many perspectives and the different levels as you explained. There are many challenges, but luckily there are people there who can work on those. When you look back at this article, is there anything you would recommend that should be done or the steps to do? Or is it too early?

Jeevan: Yeah, I have seen so many studies, so many stages that we should follow. I think we should have a broad mind while recruiting students, while recruiting faculty members, assessment and evaluation system, teaching learning systems, so many things that we have to move forward.

Number one, while recruiting the faculty members, the international best practices should be followed. They are not the same as the written test

Second, while admitting the students for equity and access for equity, we should take more students so that everyone can learn who wants to learn in the Open University. We should be open for all.

Number 3 we should start some vocational subject [studies] so that people who have skills but are not certified, we could provide certification for them.

And number 5 we have to change the evaluation system. For example, in Finland we had a very nice talk because you don't believe on the written examination and memorization systems. So, it's not the evaluation system which we are following here.

There are some changes that I have seen after writing this article. We are moving on; we are taking help from the 21st century skills. And when the 21st century skills course comes in the Open University, it will be a guide for the other subject also.

Eila: Lots of interesting steps to take are put in place. Excellent. Is there anything else you wish to say to the listeners?

Jeevan: Yeah, I just I would like to thank you for giving me this opportunity and I would like to thank the 21st Century Skills Project. I'm a coordinator of that project and I proudly say that I'm a coordinator of that project as we have a lot to learn from international practices from Finland. I have read many times that Finland is the mother of education, so we should be ready to change. We should have a broad mind and we should have the goals and the positive mind.

Thank you.

Eila: Thank you very much, Jeevan. This was a very interesting interview. Thank you. And just to let you know, this interesting article by Jeevan can be accessed through our website.

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More information: www.jamk.fi/globalteacheredu