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Upgrading Education in Nepal: A Personal Report from a stars Alumnus



stars alumnus Prof. Dr. **Markus PRANDINI** recently conducted an educational project with the National Academy of Science and Technology (NAST) in Dhangadhi in the Far-Western Province of Nepal. The project aimed to support the lecturers of NAST to extend their repertoire in teaching methodologies in order to provide the best possible education for the local students. In this personal report, Markus writes about his motivation to make a difference through education and what he considers the competencies necessary for any students and future leaders to thrive in the 21st century. Nepal's vision to progress from a least developed towards a middle-income country will also be in the focus of the [stars Nepal alumni study tour](#) which takes place from 28 February to 3 March 2021.

“Bandas happen almost every day somewhere here in Nepal,” explains Shivhari Sharma Mudbhari to me. He is the principal of the National Academy of Science and Technology (NAST) located in Dhangadhi in the Far-Western Province of Nepal. “During a banda, markets remain closed, shops are shut, roads are blocked and colleges like NAST are not allowed to teach their students”. In Nepalese “bandh” stands for “close”. It is the term most often used to describe a general strike. “Yesterday the local Tharu community announced a two-day strike to get one of their imprisoned leaders released. We therefore need to keep the doors of our college locked for today and tomorrow.”

The NAST college is a private educational institution in Far-Western Nepal that offers technical and managerial undergraduate programs to promote educational opportunities for its students. “It is indispensable for Nepalese young people to complete a bachelor degree in order to open the possibility of attaining a job after graduation: no degree – no job. Through our Bachelor Degree Programs here at NAST, we want our students to become competent, skilled and efficient future managers, engineers and government officials,” emphasizes Prem Joshi, the head of the Human Development Department at

NAST, “however, being one of the least developed countries, we are aware that the Nepalese educational system still requires various reforms to be at par with international standards.”

It has always been my personal vision to foster education as a main driver for individual growth and economic prosperity. Making a difference through education was my main motivation to sign up with Swisscontact to conduct a four-week educational project with NAST. The Swiss foundation Swisscontact promotes “inclusive economic, social and ecological development to make an effective contribution towards sustainable and widespread prosperity in developing and emerging economies”. In Nepal, one of its focus countries, Swisscontact supports manifold projects to contribute to an inclusive growth path within the country.

My assignment aims to enhance the educational quality at NAST through the training of the college’s faculties in using modern techniques of teaching. When I leave Switzerland in mid-February 2020 towards Kathmandu, curiosity and anticipation prevail. “How will I be received at NAST? Will my assignment make a difference? How can the local lecturers be empowered to play on the full range of teaching methodologies?” After an overnight stay in the Tibet Guest House in Kathmandu, a 45-min flight takes me from the capital westward along the majestic Himalayan scenery to Dhangadhi. As a sub-metropolis, Dhangadhi is the main business centre in Western Nepal. The city has about 100'000 inhabitants and is a major provider of education, health and employment opportunities in the region. Upon arrival, the travellers are greeted with a panel displaying the message “Wholehearted Welcome to Dhangadhi Airport”. This warm reception shall not just be some kind-sounding words, but represent the preeminent hospitality which Nepalese people grant their guests.



Student participation and involvement during the NAST project

The first question I am asked when meeting with the principal and the lecturers of NAST later on that day is: “What kind of tea would you like to have, black or with milk?” This question would accompany me during my entire four-week stay in Dhangadhi. A common cup of tea is not only the most effective ritual to establish a personal and social bond with each other, but will prove to be a facilitator for any kind of situation during the upcoming project. In our meeting we agree to officially kick-off our project the next morning. I still have to get used to the time difference of 4h 45m between Nepal and Switzerland, not without wondering why

Nepal has a quarter hourly time zone. “We have a joke here in Nepal that Nepalis are always 15 minutes late” stresses Joshi Shankar, one of the lecturers, with a smile.

Nevertheless, the next day all participants gather on time in the large conference hall of NAST. We envision once more the objective of the project to enhance the faculty’s repertoire of teaching techniques. As a procedure, we agree on a combination of class observations for me to gain an overview about the currently applied teaching methods, as well as workshops to elaborate on the lecturers’ styles and approaches of teaching. When observing the classes at NAST in the coming days, I witness a committed faculty who

aligns the lectures to the learning objectives, activates the pre-knowledge of the students and gives the classes an efficient structure. The curriculum at NAST is organized in 1-h blocks, with five different topics being taught each morning during a six-day week (only Saturday off). Most subjects are delivered via direct teaching with a rather low student involvement. During classes, the lecturers highly emphasize student behaviour, discipline and control. They also have a strong concern to achieve the learning objectives in the available teaching time, with a certain effect of “rushing through” the learning contents.

The job of a lecturer at NAST is a balancing act to fulfil the requirements of the local community and to comply with the standards of international education. The economy in Western Nepal is based on agriculture, trade and small businesses. The local community expects a college like NAST to equip its students with practical skills to become active in these sectors, while at the same time the students shall acquire competencies which are promoted internationally to thrive in the 21st century, such as the 4 C's: Creativity, Critical Thinking, Collaboration and Communication. “Let us take this balancing act as the starting point of our faculty workshops”. In three workshops I want the lecturers of NAST to reflect on their teaching approaches and methodologies. “I have observed in your classes that you mostly apply a teacher-focused instruction of your students. This is efficient and supports you in covering the learning objectives of the curriculum. We can position direct instruction in the zone of desired effects, as John Hattie has shown in his famous “Visible Learning Research”. But let us also consider the feedbacks that your students have given me during the class observations. One student mentioned that a main problem at NAST is the missing practical application of the knowledge which the students receive. Another student emphasized that they have to learn so much theoretical knowledge through one-way teaching that their individual contributions come too short.”

How to manage the balancing act of delivering efficient classes via direct teaching and, simultaneously, fostering active student involvement and student-centred learning via class discussions, case studies or projects? As a framework to do so, we compare in the workshops traditional learning theories, such as behaviourism, against modern learning theories, such as constructivism. At NAST, most teaching is rooted in behaviourism, which understands learning as a passive adaptation of knowledge through instruction. As an alternative, the lecturers explore the concept of constructivism, which understands learning as an active, self-directed process of knowledge creation by the students. One approach to foster such constructivist learning is the methodology of Problem-Based Learning (PBL), where students acquire relevant insights through elaborating solutions to a complex problem. As a result, the students can build up applicable and transferable knowledge and skills.



Final presentation and closing ceremony of the NAST project

An introduction and short discussion make the faculty familiar with the PBL concept. Each lecturer receives the task to develop a problem-based learning sequence and apply it in one of his or her upcoming classes. The implementation – however – is almost rained off as the strike of the local Tharu community is announced precisely these days. The NAST college is forced to close for two days; the students need to stay at home. “You see,” principal Mudbhari points out to me “we fight with many circumstances here in Nepal.



Main building of NAST (Dhangadhi Engineering College)

Our country has high prospects for economic growth, but political instability still slows us down. The frequent strikes and blockades deprive our students of their right to education, and we run the risk of not completing our academic calendar on time. We need to stay flexible and adapt to these circumstances. The hope lies in our students here at NAST to be the drivers of change and progress. It is therefore important for us that we can also rely on foreign expertise to help us constantly improve our educational efforts and quality. I am pleased to see that my lecturers are motivated to explore a wider range of teaching methods, and this way

enhancing our students' knowledge and skills. We will continue on the path you have initiated with this project here at NAST". We finish the day with a relishing cup of milk tea, both of us adhering to a quote of Buddha who according to legend was born in Nepal: "One moment can change a day, one day can change a life and one life can change the world."



*Prof. Dr. **Markus PRANDINI** holds a PhD in Educational and International Management from the University of St. Gallen (HSG), Switzerland. He has been working for over 10 years in the field of management development at various international companies. Until 2018, Markus served as Professor for International Business at Zurich University of Applied Sciences (ZHAW) where he had built up and led the Competence Centers International and Asia Business. He is currently a Visiting Professor at Shenzhen Technology*

University (SZTU) and he will start a new assignment by June 2020 with the biggest private online university of Germany. His lecturing, research and consulting activities focus on the internationalization process of Small and Mid-Sized Companies to and from Emerging Markets. Markus holds several awards in teaching, amongst others the Credit Suisse Award for Best Teaching at ZHAW.

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