

International support for advocates of social and economic inclusion for persons with disabilities:

An evaluation of a Bhutan-United States fellowship program

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Research questions and objectives

- 1.) To what extent was professional development training in disability-inclusive employment strategies from the United States useful to professionals in relevant fields in Bhutan?
- 2.) What specific strategies were useful across multiple sectors, such as education, healthcare, social work, government welfare, and private business?

Key findings

Conceptual training and experiential education appeared to be useful across multiple disability-inclusive employment strategies.

Customized employment, work-based learning, self-determination, and person-centered planning appeared to have the greatest utility across education, civil society, and private sectors.

Higher education experiences for persons with disabilities was less of a concern for 25% of survey respondents.

Implications

International experiential learning can be beneficial, but is limiting due to costs, time commitments, and at times lack of relevant topics. Using international training and evaluation data to identify follow-on activities in country, however, can promote more sustainable implementation.

Introduction

In 2019, the University of Minnesota, Royal Thimphu College, and the University of Birmingham initiated the project “Understanding, Developing, and Supporting Meaningful Work for Youth with Disabilities: Networks, Communities, and Transitions,” funded through a Global Challenges Research Grant by UK Official Development Assistance (ESRC ES/S004319/1). The project seeks to survey and share the current reality for inclusive employment and social participation for young adults with disabilities in Bhutan; provide advocacy, coordination, and interventions to support increased awareness and activity in this area; and also work towards sustained support and awareness for inclusive employment and social participation for young adults with disabilities around the world – particularly in countries with limited resources and that are significantly rural in nature.

As part of this project, in January of 2020 thirteen Inclusion Advocacy Fellows and 3 Inclusion Coordinators from across Bhutan visited the United States to undertake two weeks of site visits, professional development, job shadowing, participation, and discussions around supports for employment and social inclusion for persons with disabilities. The Fellows represented a range of sectors, including education (inclusive schools, special schools, and higher education), civil society organizations, private sector,

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and the government). The Fellows’ experiential education visit was facilitated by the University of Minnesota’s Institute on Community Integration (ICI), in collaboration with the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (MnDEED) and other community-based ICI partners. Through site visits to government organizations, schools, universities, workplaces, and non-governmental organizations, fellows engaged in discussions and participation with partners from the United States on the following topics:

- Customized employment
- Job coaching
- Entrepreneurship
- School-to-work transition
- Work-based learning
- College or university experiences
- Self-determination
- Person-centered planning
- Employment Assessment Toolkit

Ten months after the program, a follow-up survey was conducted to understand the extent to which new learning is being implemented by Fellows. As part of the fellowship program associated with the larger project, Fellows were supported by coordinators to initiate new activities based on what they had learned and observed from their experience in the United States. In November of 2020, 13 Fellows completed a survey to demonstrate how frequently new learning was being incorporated into the work of Fellows within their existing professional roles. Nine Fellows completed the survey. Results were encouraging. For all topics listed above, except “college or university experiences,” nearly every Fellow utilized new learning “sometimes” or “all the time” in their workplaces. There were no discernable patterns by sector (i.e., there were no strategies that could predictably be determined as useful or not useful by specific sector).

Fig. 1 Utility of themes and topics from USA visit, identified by Bhutanese Fellows

Topic	Use frequently (%)	Use sometimes (%)	Not used because information was not helpful (%)	Not used because information was not applicable to sector (%)
Customized Employment	50	50	0	0
Job Coaching	33	56	0	11
Entrepreneurship	33	56	0	11
School to Work Transition	33	56	11	0
Work-based Learning	33	67	0	0
College/University Experiences	11	33	11	46
Self-Determination	44	56	0	0
Person-Centered Planning	56	44	0	0
Employment Toolkit	11	44	11	22

Recommendation:

*Based on cross-sectoral utility, further **professional development opportunities** in customized employment, work-based learning, self-determination, and person-centered planning should be established for people interested in disability-inclusive employment in Bhutan.*

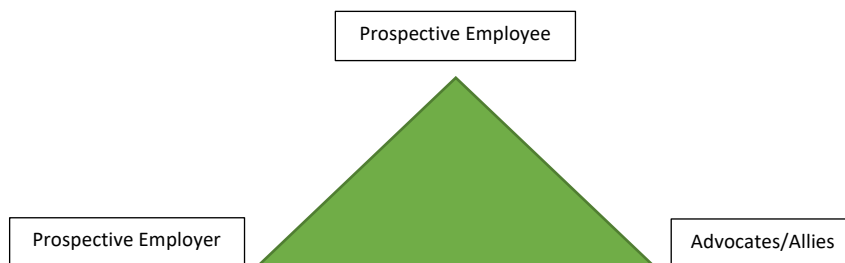
Barriers Faced in Implementation

Although Fellows reported relatively high levels of implementation of the strategies learned in their international fellowship, 6 Fellows reported that they faced barriers. **Fellows’ narrative responses related to themes of challenges of implementation during COVID-19 lockdowns, resources, communication barriers, and reference materials.** Two Fellows reported that efforts were hampered by the COVID-19 virus. One of these fellows stated, “The main barrier this year was due to COVID, otherwise maybe I could have done much better.” At the time this evaluation was written, the COVID-19 virus was still present in Bhutan, and movement and gatherings were still somewhat restricted. It is unclear how much longer COVID-19 will impact social activities worldwide, so adaptive measures may be needed to ensure continuation of opportunities for persons with disabilities in Bhutan.

A second barrier was related to resources. One Fellow reported that “capacity building for people with disabilities and financial support” hampered the use of disability-inclusive employment strategies. The barrier reported by this respondent pointed out two gaps in the US fellowship program. First, among the 13 Fellows, only one identified as having a disability. To this end, greater coordination with organizations of persons with disabilities in Bhutan might have helped facilitate greater participation of Bhutanese employment advocates who have disabilities themselves. Although the international fellowship program was inclusive in nature, greater representation of persons with disabilities, coupled with funds for ‘cascade’ trainings by Fellows themselves, may have addressed the respondent’s barriers.

Finally, one respondent noted that “We need interpreters to interpret from spoken language to Bhutanese Sign Language and vice versa.” This particular barrier focused on inclusive education. The barrier experienced by both the sign language user and their advocate in this comment highlights an important perspective for prospective employers, prospective employees, and advocates. The figure below demonstrates how communication is essential for all actors in inclusive employment. If any of the lines in the figure below are broken because of inaccessible communication, additional resources such as interpretation, accessible technologies, or workplace accommodations may be needed.

Figure 2: Communication linkages to support social and economic inclusion for persons with disabilities



Recommendation:

Once capacity of advocates is built around disability-inclusive employment, follow-on grant schemes are needed to address implementation barriers. Because implementation barriers will likely be individualized, these can best be addressed through ‘pots’ of funds that can be used by advocates to facilitate capacity building of employers, employees, and to facilitate inclusive communication between employers and employees.

Implementation Stories

Three stories below represent the different ways in which concepts of person-centered planning and customized employment were implemented in Bhutan. All stories represent pre-COVID activities that were later stopped during lockdown periods. Stories are presented un-edited and may contain grammatical and syntactical errors.

Fellow 1: *I look at my students in a different way because I am working in a school. When I was looking at one of my students with disabilities, I was always thinking I should get him into this kind of employment or this kind of job, I should train him for this so that he could make his livelihood. But now after having been there (Minnesota) I look at him and I look at his or her abilities and I think ‘yes’ – for his abilities, for his needs, as per his physical and emotional needs and his intellectual capacities, this is what needs to be done in regards to job and employment...So I don’t look at ‘this is what she should do’ I look at the child and say “OK, what needs to be done if he has to be employed. How can we make this employment appropriate, or how could we make livelihood skills appropriate for him or her” kind of thing.*

...He (the student) was very much interested in designing things. He had already worked on a a design for a walking stick and he was thinking of doing a hydraulic jack or something like that for himself to be able to drive a car because he has these contractures below the knee...He was really interested in designing and doing things with machines...so we have...customized it for his needs, though he doesn’t need much customization because he is really brilliant and he can move about on his knees, but I did mention these things to her (the supervisor) that he might need some kind of adjustment so to make it more comfortable... This is just the beginning so I hope that through the years that my students are graduating in our school, I hope to be able to work on customized employment through my community.

(Female teacher, rural mainstream school with special education program)

Fellow 1's interaction demonstrated a shift from wanting to 'train' a youth with disability in a pre-determined vocational track, because of a belief that such a track was the most appropriate route, to following the youth's talents and interests and making recommended workplace changes to support his inclusion.

Fellow 2: *I wanted to try customized employment for one of my students who has acquired basic tailoring skills in school....So I made a plan and this is my plan. I was going to attach him to a tailoring shop, which is closer to their home. My plan was to talk with the owner of the tailoring shop, he is the teacher's father-in-law, to talk with him and place him in that shop, for internship, getting trained, work there for an hour every day or every alternate days or maybe twice a week, something like that so I had planned for him, and since he could come to school and back to home independently for the last two years it was a plus point for him. Then, since he takes the same route home-to-school, school-to-home, that route he can easily take because he has been taking for the last two years, so he knows the route. Now to take him from home to the tailoring shop and the tailoring shop to home, that route he has to learn, so I shared that plan with his mother and his mother was very happy, because she also was very supportive of him. I could see that from the way she has shown her enthusiasm.*

(Female teacher, urban mainstream school with special education program)

Fellow 2's plan acknowledged that supportive employment requires more than just workplace accommodations. In the case of this student, understanding and planning for independent movement (on foot) was part of the support for employment. Fellow 2 took an "ecological" approach to supporting employment by identifying a prospective supportive employer, identifying and reducing barriers (such as transportation), and acknowledging the importance of family support for work.

Fellow 3: *The other part, I was able to participate in the women and girls with disability (meetings) so there I was able to work closely with United Nations (UN) Bhutan and Ability Bhutan Society (ABS) and also with the different Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Bhutan. So, I was able to share our goals and how we are able to facilitate people with disability to have inclusive employment in Bhutan, so different ways I feel the training in Minnesota really helped and whatever work I carried out is always related to my experience that I have gained after coming back from the training.*

(Female inclusive employment coordinator)

In Fellow 3's case, the importance of viewing disability and employment through a gendered lens came as a natural output of her own interests combined with new knowledge about inclusive employment. Reflection and conversation around the intersectionality of gender and disability are important outcomes emerging in Bhutan that were not part of the original experiential program in Minnesota but were carried forward by Fellow 3.

Recommendation:

Bhutanese Fellows extended their knowledge through identifying the importance of social ecology and gender as part of customized employment and person-centered planning. These extensions warrant further research on how broad concepts of inclusive employment can be contextualized and adapted to fit local contexts.

Conclusion

Customized employment, work-based learning, self-determination, and person-centered planning all appear to be concepts that were perceived to be transferable by a group of Bhutanese Fellows who undertook an experiential education program at the University of Minnesota's Institute on Community Integration. Findings from this formative evaluation indicate that international fellowships focused on learning may be effective if two conditions are met: 1) new or novel information is presented to Fellows in a way that demonstrates the concepts in action (rather than just in theory or by formal presentation), and 2) Fellows must have the agency to take new information and apply, adapt, and extend it to fit their own contexts. All programs, however, face constraints. In this case, not all topic areas were as easily utilized as others. In such cases, presenting a range of possible options may increase chances for transferability and adaptation. Finally, the COVID crisis put an end to many of the activities listed above and must be acknowledged as a defining feature of 2020.



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Originally developed for the project titled, “Understanding, Developing, and Supporting Meaningful Work for Youth with Disabilities: Networks, Communities, and Transitions,” funded through a Global Challenges Research Grant by UK Official Development Assistance (ESRC ES/S004319/1).

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Recommended citation: Johnstone, C.J. & Schuelka, M.J. (2021). *International support for advocates of social and economic inclusion for persons with disabilities: An evaluation of a Bhutan-United States fellowship program*. (Policy Brief 2021-01). Fora Education. <https://www.foraed.com/media-pubs/esrcgcrf-project-bhutan>