

## **The Present and the Future of Collaboration in the Higher Education among the SAARC Countries**

We know that seven South Asian countries Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka—launched the economic and political organization named SAARC on 8 December 1985. Afghanistan joined it in April 2007. SAARC provides a platform for working together in a spirit of friendship, trust, and understanding to accelerate economic and social development, including education, in South Asian countries. In terms of population, the SAARC region covers more than 1,500 million people, one of the largest such regional organizations. SAARC countries share certain common social and economic problems, including those related to education. Low literacy rates, poor infrastructure, substandard quality of education, heavy dropout rates, and inadequate funding are some problems countries of this region face. Higher education has strong bearing on the development of a nation. Regional cooperation in education would accelerate the pace of development.

The significance of Human Resource in socio-economic development of the region has been recognized since the inception of SAARC. The leaders at the First SAARC Summit in 1985 emphatically asserted that their fundamental goal was to accelerate the process of economic and social development through the optimum utilization of human and material resources to promote the welfare and prosperity of people and to improve their quality of life. SAARC countries have been cooperating in the development of various dimensions of human resource. Such cooperation started as early as August 1982 in the fields of sports, arts and culture. In 1998, the SAARC leaders decided to include education in the agreed areas of cooperation and a Technical Committee was formed to deal with the principal area requiring urgent attention in the region.

The priority themes identified for cooperation in the field of Education are: Women and Education; Universal Primary Education; Literacy, Post Literacy and Continuing Education; Educational Research; Science and Technical Education, Education for the Underserved Areas and Distance Education. The nominations of Nodal Agencies for each of the priority themes have been completed and appropriate Action Plans are being prepared.

Short-term activities in the field of Education include: Expert Group Meetings; Workshops/Seminars on the priority themes; Modernization of Curriculum; Environmental Education including Population Education; Planning and Management of Education, Teacher Training, Higher Education and Book Production and Marketing.

### **The steps that were taken so far in higher education:**

1. The leaders recognized as early as at the Fourth Summit in 1988 that HRD was one of the means of achieve the objectives of SAARC. In this context they welcomed the offer of Pakistan to host the [SAARC Human Resource Development Centre in Islamabad](#). The Centre undertakes research, imparts training, and disseminates information on HRD issues and advises Member States on HRD related policies and strategies.

2. At the Twelfth SAARC Summit held in Islamabad in January 2004, the leaders underlined that investment in human resource development was critical for future development of South Asia. It was, therefore, essential to establish a network of centers of higher learning and training, and Skill Development Institutes across South Asia.

3. At the Thirteenth SAARC Summit held in November 2005 in Dhaka, India proposed to create a Centre of Excellence, in the form of a South Asian University, which can provide world class facilities and professional faculty to students and researchers drawn from every country of the region. The First Academic Session of SAU commenced on 26 August 2010 with an intake of 50 no. of students. In its second year of functioning, SAU has 156 students enrolled for Masters' Degrees in Development Economics, International Relations, Sociology, Law, Biotechnology and Computer Science. The third academic session had commenced on 16 July 2012. Applications have already been invited for admission to various academic programmes for the fourth academic session to commence in July 2013. The University should receive the application by the fixed deadline of 25th February 2013.

4. The SAARC Chair, Fellowship and Scholarship Scheme was instituted in 1987 with the aim of providing increased cross-fertilization of ideas through greater interaction among students, scholars and academics in the SAARC countries. In the recent past, the Governments of India and Bangladesh have offered scholarships, i.e. in the academic years 2008 – 2009 – 2010 – 2011. The scholarships have been offered in the following manner:

a. Nepal: MBBS, Masters Degree in Rural Development

b. India: Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) scholarships in the fields of biosciences, social sciences, architecture, languages and commerce and business administration, etc

c. Bangladesh has offered 01 chair, 04 fellowship and 10 scholarships under various disciplines

d. In accordance with the decision of the Tenth Summit, the Vice Chancellors of Open Universities met in Colombo in January 1999 and made recommendations for the establishment of SACODiL to strengthen cooperation in the joint development of educational programmes, credit transfers, and promotion of equal opportunities and access to knowledge. The proposal was endorsed by the Twenty-sixth Session of the Standing Committee (Nuwara Eliya, March 1999).

### **The Future Possibilities:**

Higher education is of utmost significance for modernization of an economy and creation of a knowledge-based society. SAARC member countries, therefore, must assess the progress of higher education, both in quantity and quality, and take corrective measures. There are a number of areas where the member countries can work in collaboration.

- In the entire SAARC region, enrollment in higher education as a proportion of the eligible age group is low. So the first and foremost task is to increase opportunities for access to higher education to meet the educational needs of various sections of groups, including women.
- Improvement in the quality of education is another aspect requiring urgent attention. Establishing world-class schools of higher education will prevent youth being lured away by foreign institutions.
- Unconditional cooperation in curriculum development, preparation of instructional material, implementation of innovative practices, use of new technologies, exchange of experts, and promotion of collaborative research are the needs of the hour.

- In order to mitigate misunderstanding and distrust among the people of SAARC countries some topics in the curriculum of different educational levels (as France and Germany have made) could be added which may help the people to know each other in a better way.
- SAARC should promote and finance regional conferences on various issues on higher education, including those related to quality improvement. For improving quality, universities in the region need to learn to utilize available resources in a more effective manner by evolving transparent systems of recruitment and promotion of teachers, introducing interactive teaching methods, and reducing political activities on the campuses.
- Almost all SAARC countries have been financing their education systems out of public funds. But allocation of public funds for education is very low—between 2 percent and 4 percent of GNP. Keeping in view the degree of underdevelopment, all governments must consider devoting more funds for education. The countries which could not allocate much could be benefited by sharing the knowledge and experiences with the countries which could allocate more.
- Each member country may establish a SAARC University. These universities will be the means of sharing and exchanging ideas, knowledge and technologies among the students, teachers and scholars of the SAARC countries which in turn will create a congenial atmosphere to enhance the cooperative attitude among the people of this region.
- Until universities are established, Centers of Excellence could be set up which may create and disseminate knowledge in the fields like History, Culture and Religion. Exchange of knowledge in these areas may touch the heart of the people more easily and create a bond of tie among them.
- Exchange programmes for students and teachers could be made a serious and regular feature.
- SAARC Language Institutes could be set up, where any one can learn at least the National Languages of the member countries at a very low cost. Through this, cooperation among the people could be made easier because dialogue is the first step for cooperation.
- Expenditure in these respects could be met in such a way that 50% will be provided by the host country and the rest 50% will be provided by the other member countries.

We all know that “United we stand and divided we fall”. We should pay heed to the saying and embody the spirit. If we do some more brainstorming we may find many more areas of collaboration in the field of higher education. May the Almighty Creator help us to stand up with high heads.

#### Sources

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