

Stopping the haemorrhage

The brain drain affects every aspect of Nepal's development

MARIANNE HEREDGE

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Over half the students in every class in the Deusa Secondary School, Solu Khumbu, failed their exams this year. Over 300 children will be retaking the year again. Many of them will drop out to work in their parents' fields or to work as porters in the trekking season.

This school, a day's walk from the district headquarters at Salleri, is not untypical of government schools over most of the country.

The healthpost at Deusa has paracetamol and some antibiotics for stomach complaints. The medical helper, Dil Kumari Rai, does the best she can given her resources, but she only has basic training and if anyone is seriously ill they have to walk or be carried to the hospital at Phaplu, a day's walk away.

A year ago, the secondary school advertised for a science teacher to teach classes up to class 10, with a salary of Rs 10,000 a month. Seven candidates applied, but all either got cold feet, or asked for extra incentives to lighten the hardship of living in the village.

For most people who are qualified in fields such as health and education, working in a village seems like a hardship placement, and death knell to their career prospects.

"The facilities are better in Kathmandu," one nurse told me. Working in the capital not only means a higher standard of living and more opportunities for jobs on the side, but also the chance to study English, and eventually secure a job abroad, their ticket out of Nepal.

These sentiments are understandable. Even for those who do have a genuine desire to help their community, the chance to build a career in the US or UK is a temptation hard to resist.

It is easy to sermonise and tell qualified professionals that they should feel duty-bound to stay and work in their own communities, but at the end of the day it doesn't look like this will stop the brain drain, which now runs in Nepal like a haemorrhage.

The fact is there is little incentive for professionals to work in the villages. Few people are prepared to sacrifice their own comfort and future for humanitarian ideals, that often look unachievable in the context of widespread government neglect and institutions which no one respects, or expects to function properly.

Many professional people believe that their chances will be better in Kathmandu or abroad. This is not always the case, though. Even Kathmandu only has a finite number of qualified jobs, as do the saturated work markets of North America and Europe. Many immigrants who are qualified as teachers, engineers or doctors in their own countries end up serving fast food or stacking supermarket shelves. And anyhow, nurses and teachers in the UK are barely able to make ends meet from their own salaries.

If aspiring emigrants knew about all of this they might be less eager to seek employment abroad. But, as we all know, myths of streets paved with gold persist, and so rather than trying to dissuade them from leaving with scare stories, Nepal will eventually have to offer more incentives for these people to stay.

It is not easy to offer a solution to this problem which will actually work. There is no panacea which can bring decent services to rural areas in an instant. But maybe a change in the mentality of development-makers and state institutions would help. At present, progress seems to be measured in concrete terms—miles of roads laid, number of buildings constructed. Of course these things are important, but having competent people who are willing to work in them is too.

Most government schools have overcrowded classes, crumbling structures and a lack of teaching materials. Is it surprising that many teachers lose hope? Similar problems beset many healthposts. In order to encourage people to take and stay in these jobs, the government needs to address the neglect and hopelessness which are so often found in state services.

If people don't respect and feel respected in their jobs, they will never want to stay in them, and the villages of Nepal will remain without services as they are now.

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M Heredge

HEADS DOWN: Students at Deusa Secondary School, Solu Khumbu.