

Dignifying vocational jobs still a work in progress

Tempa Wangdi, Chumey

Although the wages vary, the challenge of working a blue-collar job transcends boundary.

OCCUPATION

Being a road worker in Switzerland may not be as tough as it is in Bhutan, but its not easy either, according to road builders Kevin Bertschinger, 21, and Alain Zollig, 22, from Walo Bertsinger.

They were in Chumey Technical Training Institute (TTI) recently on a two-day exchange programme, as part of the 40 years of Bhutan-Helvetas relation celebrations, and shared their experience with Bhutanese students attending the national certificate (NC3) in masonry. According to the vocational qualification framework, NC 1 is the lowest and NC3, the highest in terms of skill competency requirements or complexity at the vocational level.

While salary is better, both Kevin and Alain said blue-collar jobs even in Switzerland isn't as respected.

"Those working by the roads wearing high visibility safety apparel are looked down as someone who knows nothing," Kevin said.

"The safety apparel means you are nobody and menial," Alain added.

choosing to take up jobs as road builders. While it was a dream come true for Kevin, it wasn't anything less for Alain who enjoys working with sand, cement and asphalt.

"I wanted to become a road builder since my childhood," Kevin said adding that pursuing his dream wasn't given the objections from his parents. His parents wanted him to continue his apprenticeship in information technology (IT) because of the respect attached to wearing clean clothes.

"In the beginning, my parents weren't happy when I left the IT job to become a road builder," Kevin said. "But now my parents are happy because I am happy."

Although it has improved over the years, dignifying blue-collar jobs still remains a challenge for Bhutan.

TTI principal, Sangay Dorji said there is a dramatic improvement in the attitude of Bhutanese trainees since 2007 when officials from the institute had to travel to villages in search of students.

"Today, the institute has 198 students against 29 five years ago when the ratio of students and instructors stood at almost 1:2," Sangay Dorji said, adding there is still much to be done.

"Even now most students pursuing vocational trainings here are from humble families



Vocational education: Kevin and Alain work with the TTI trainees in Chumey, Bumthang

A masonry trainee at the TTI, Thukten Jamtsho said societal pressure and stigma are the biggest challenges for Bhutanese youth who take up vocational education.

"Commuters pass unkind and discriminating remarks while we were helping with the road-widening works in Gytesa," he said, adding even school children pass harsh remarks at the trainees.

Another trainee Kinzang Choden said parents and relatives are now however more supportive of children taking up vocational trainings but the communities are yet to share this attitude.

as Kevin and Alain have also learnt, if not mastered the skills to ignore the society's attitude towards vocational education. They take pride in being a skilled labour and that is what keeps them going.

"Some friends who are holding better jobs look down on us because most still think TTIs is inferior," Kinzang Choden said while Kevin added, "as long as I love what I am doing, I don't care what the society says about my job."

While learning to be a skilled worker, those like her, both at home and abroad such