

Raising the bar on skilling

There are a lot of young people in India who want to get a qualification that will set them up to earn well and progress professionally. There are a lot of employers who say they can't get enough qualified people. Despite a lot of high-powered talk and action by many entities over the past few decades, the chasm between the demand and supply for relevant capability remains unbridged, and young India remains unable to achieve its desired potential.

Fewer cooks make for better broth

● There are too many national initiatives running in parallel, each having its own take on what the job to be done is and how it should be accomplished. The National Skill Development Corporation and Skill India use the word “skilling” and fall under the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship. The National Education Policy sits in the Ministry of Education and prescribes “vocational education”. The network of Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) and Industrial Training Centres (ITC) describe their focus as “industrial training” and imparting “vocational trades”.

At the same time, there is an increase in enrolment in degree courses in colleges, but evaluation reports point to poor quality education resulting in low employability. Meanwhile, a young person who wants to be a nurse, paramedic, crane driver, car mechanic, or work in tourism or media content doesn't know what to study or where to study. Even if they identify some private training college, they cannot afford it (nor can they get a loan for it).

● There is an urgent need to simplify, streamline, and reimagine this fragmented space that dissipates resources and effort. One national thrust, one vocabulary, one strategy (think of strategy as a *raga* with

many possible songs rather than a single prescriptive tune) with many executing actors would be a useful force multiplier.

● Let's start with having a singular vocabulary and a single mission statement. Skilling, vocational training, teaching a trade are all about education, let's use that word. The job to be done is to educate (impart some rigorous and formal teaching and training) young people to acquire some *capability bundle* that will equip them to have a profession (a “line”) with which they can earn sustainably and grow. By this definition, many skilling initiatives don't qualify.

Reimagine college education

● The National Education Policy (NEP) says it wants to create high-quality vocational (profession-giving) education. That's good news. It also wants to tackle the “perception that vocational education is inferior to “mainstream” education by starting vocational education from class 6 itself. It is here, despite its good intentions, that it may lose the plot. The best way to address the perception issue is to offer high-quality vocational courses in colleges alongside

general courses or to replace non-value-adding general courses with vocationally specialised ones, making them the new “mainstream”. But until class 10, can we focus on all-round development of human beings to help them live a more informed life? Everyone needs to learn history, geography, science, civics and now also about artificial intelligence, cyberspace, climate change, and literature. It is after class 10 that vocational college can begin.

● It is here that the whole college system architecture needs to be reimaged. Perhaps the answer is a network of special vocational colleges, or including vocational courses in all existing colleges so that they are seen as a real alternative to the general graduate

degree. For vocational education courses, private college fees will just not work. The government has to scale vocational education courses in government colleges and incentivise new private colleges or compel existing ones to offer these courses at prescribed price points, via subsidy. Instead of fixing what ain't broke at the IITs and IIMs, there should be an ambitious and comprehensive framework to deliver high-quality vocational education, focusing on 50 professions where shortages are already felt or projected, or where there is global demand. This is the investment required to give all our young an opportunity to have a profession and deliver the demographic dividend.

Communicate forcefully and widely

● It is also high time we communicated directly and consistently to young people and their parents, especially those in the lower socio-economic strata, about how they can get professional qualifications. Policy documents talk of “counselling”, but there is little mass awareness or information on the ground about how to get qualified for what you want to do. A big advantage that young people in higher social strata have, beyond money, is that of better information and guidance in understanding what they want to do and how to get there.

Perhaps the cause of social justice can best be served by reimagining vocational education. And no, the private sector should not be the one responsible for education and capability development. They should manage their own workforce, directly or indirectly employed, and build their own human capital to improve themselves. Nation-building education is the government's job. It needs to do it with the same muscle and might that were used to implement the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, or link Aadhaar to everything, execute the Covid vaccination drive, or achieve financial inclusion.

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