

Reimagining skilling, not reengineering

The NITI Aayog report “Reimagining Skilling for Viksit Bharat@2047”, released this month, could have lived up to its title better. Reimagining is about what is dared to be questioned and touched. It is not about improving processes of the existing machine or adding bits of “middleware” to upgrade the operating system, but about questioning the frame and the core itself, and being willing to design very different solutions, if warranted.

To be fair, the report does a good job of reengineering the existing system towards the goal of “skilling” large numbers of people at something. What that “something” should be and how to adapt continuously as it changes is the most prickly question of the new age. It offers improved discovery, access, affordability, internships, and credentialing, among other things. However, it feels like a factory redesigned for enhanced efficiency, scale and productivity without asking whether the products it turns out need to be radically different and whether this factory can or should make them.

The report has talked to young people about their problems with the present skilling system and heard the voice of the customer. However, “tell me what you find right or wrong with what is on offer” is still product-centricity, not customer-centric listening. Talking to people about their livelihood search, future aspirations, what they are currently doing about it, may suggest different approaches; and a different role for the state and the market.

A reimagined skilling system must be built around the changing world of work: What is changing, how fast, and how to respond to rapid changes, and counter intuitive shifts. For example, the runaway growth of the artificial intelligence (AI) industry is resulting in the recruitment of electricians and carpenters by the thousands (*The New York Times*, “The Future of Artificial Intelligence Depends on Finding More Skilled Humans for Some Very Physical Jobs”). Chris Price, the founder-chief executive officer of Hadrian and a rising figure in

hard tech and AI-powered advanced manufacturing, says: “All the white-collar jobs are going to be automated. I think we are going to see massive hyperinflation in blue-collar salaries.”

The report flags health care as a rising sector, but what is the human work required given explosive health tech adoption? A recent article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* predicts that autonomous AI could surpass human-assisted care by 2030 and that “humans-in-the-loop” may hinder AI performance. Even on empathy, supposedly the last resort of humans, chatbots outperform humans, it says.

The point is that the future is being continuously shaped and reshaped, its contours are hard to predict, and the life of each wave of skill demand is likely short. Reimagining, therefore, requires architecting a meta system capable of continuously sensing change and responding to it.

A central feature of the report is its heavy reliance on something called “industry”, which will co-design curricula, own apprenticeships, provide placements, and so on. The construct of “industry” as large conglomerates and organised sector companies powering

jobs is now obsolete. Such industry today employs only a tiny sliver of the workforce, and betting that this will reverse by 2047 is risky, given modern manufacturing, AI-enabled services, the stock market’s whip for profit growth and the pressure to remain cost-competitive.

The “reimagine” question is: Who or what is “industry” today, and can it play the many roles this report expects of it? Can small and medium enterprises, India’s largest employer today, be the “industry” that will deliver on these expectations? Not likely, unless some reimagining is done to make them capable and willing to play the role.

Reimagining how banks can be made to fund education loans, more easily and at scale would have been very useful. Yes, lifelong learning vouchers can be the new free foodgrains. The recommendation to fund

skilling providers based on placements is alarming, given that the goal should be to build top-class institutions of vocational education, capable of designing, delivering, and continuously adapting high-quality products — people — to a changing world. “Outcome-oriented,” which the report bats for, should mean grant money based on institutional parameters, which are more appropriate for education, rather than on placements, which are more appropriate for a sales agency and vulnerable to malpractice. The Ministry of Education has already worked on such quality measures.

While the report references other countries, it borrows selectively, and misses the movement towards “next practice” in countries including the United States and Germany. Germany is moving towards broader competencies and occupational areas and “adaptability” as a core competence area to protect qualifications from becoming obsolete. The American conversation around vocational education is shifting too. Interestingly, grants are available to people with bachelor’s degrees who want to retrain — highly relevant for India and a low-hanging fruit. It could eventually lead to reimagining the useless graduate degree itself, achieve the goal of “mainstreaming” skilling, and weaken the perceived hierarchy or class system between traditional college education and skilling that the report states.

This is a common problem around the world that Germany is tackling by creating greater equivalence between the two systems. Reimagining the word “skilling” might itself help. America and Germany both include the word “education”: Career and Technical Education and Vocational Education and Training, respectively. Is too much political capital now vested in the word “skilling,” or does the skilling ministry need to stand apart from the education ministry?

We now have a fairly good reengineering and tuning of the current engine of skilling. Now we await the reimagining — our 1991 moment for human development.

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