

Make Skills Development Mandatory In Higher Education

by Sanjeev Duggal, CEO and MD, Centum Learning Mar 28, 2016

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In recent years there has been a new trend in India's higher education system. Instead of setting up Centers of Excellence or merely sponsoring research, Indian corporates are getting into the educational sector establishing universities. Perhaps, they see this as the only way of creating a skilled workforce.

The textbook education and white collar jobs' obsession of most Indians has created a conundrum of giant proportions. Where there will be 13 million youth entering the workforce every year, there are not enough jobs (read white collar) to go around. Yet, look at any of

the major sectors – construction, retail, agriculture, transport, logistics – there is a dearth of skilled labour.

Take the south Indian state of Kerala for instance, a laborer will earn Rs 350/day, six times the national average of Rs 50-60/day. A laborer will easily earn Rs 10,000 per month here. Why? The state is facing a huge shortage of skilled labor since most of its working population prefers migrating outside the state to greener pastures especially the Gulf. According to government data, half of the 6.5 Mln people working in the gulf comprise Malayalis and a large chunk of them are engaged in blue collared jobs.

If India does not build a corpus of skilled labor, the Make in India vision of the government is sure to come to naught. For instance, the country currently faces a huge shortage of painters, masons, electricians, welders among other construction trade workers. Yet the scant regard most Indians have for vocational training and skills development has led to decades of neglect for these crafts. Worsening the situation students who finish tertiary education choosing to learn any one of these trades have to depend on the ITIs (Industrial Training Institutes), which are poorly managed and outdated.

Skills are not celebrated in India unlike China, where students are steered into vocational training right from their secondary education levels. India's Education system has a big task at hand to bring transition in the role from 'student' to 'worker' and prepare candidates for the new working world. Class 12 is too late for a student to pick up employability skills. Instead from class 7-8 onwards there needs to be a move away from student-oriented to teacher-oriented learning. Besides, the curriculum should be aligned to current industry requirements.

Fortunately, the Indian government has made provisions for upgrading skills under multiple disciplines and even created a separate Ministry to achieve its dream of a Skilled India. Positive steps such as National Vocational Qualifications Framework (NVEQF) and National Skills Qualification Framework (NSQF) are in the right direction which will also lead to a paradigm shift in employment from being 'qualification-based' to 'skill-based.' This change is sure to result in educational institutions focusing on imparting skills that lead to employability, rather than doling out certificates and degrees.

The NVEQF seeks to bring parity with formal education by defining various levels (E.g.; Making Level 1 equivalent to Class 9 and so on and continuing till Level 10). Other initiatives such as vertical mobility will allow a student pursuing vocational education to have the flexibility to move into mainstream education and vice versa. The government has also set up Sector Skills Council in order to bring in industry linkages, which in turn is setting up National Occupational Standards as per industry recommendations.

A nationwide network of affordable community colleges could be set up with courses and

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diplomas closely tailored to the skills related local labor market. Higher education available in the local market will also stop unsustainable migration to cities. Besides, Skills development and vocational training will bring about inclusive development and growth for rural areas, where poor children are compelled to drop out of the education system due to several socio-economic constraints. Incorporating vocational training into post-elementary education and using an ICT-based long-term plan that involves the industry will go a long way in addressing skills shortage.

Perhaps, a mandate for the industry such as the 'Companies Bill' by the major industry bodies in India to work closely with NSDC, NVEQF, along with universities to encourage innovation, help improve skill levels and address employability challenges may solve the issue of skilled workforce in India. Vocational courses could also be converted into full-fledged ITI/diploma courses.

If the Indian government can make it possible for the industry to embrace Corporate Social Responsibility through an amendment to its Companies Act, why can't the same be done for something equally, if not more important, skills development and vocational training? Only through industry-academia-government linkage and close partnership will skills development and vocational training programs become an integral part of the Indian education system. If not India will lose out on its demographic dividend of having a huge youth population, and one ready to enter the job market soon.

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