

Vocational Education and Training for the Adolescents: Challenges and Opportunities

VINEETA SIROHI*

Abstract

Stepping into the threshold of vocation is the most crucial phase for an adolescent, as it creates a perpetual impact on the individual's life. In view of the country's demographic structure, characterising declining dependency ratio, demographic bulge and possessing youngest workforce offers an opportunity for India to become a reservoir of skilled workforce against the global manpower shortage. India's transition into knowledge economy and the changing demands of the workplace requires new kinds of skilled workforce. The paper is an attempt to reflect on the opportunities and challenges posed by the global scenario and suggesting a paradigm change in the vocational education and training system in order to respond to the demand and supply mismatch of the workforce.

Context

Within the landscape of education for adolescents, few themes evoke such a ready response as vocational education and training. Nearly every stakeholder whether, educational administrator, educationist, teacher, parent or adolescent himself seems to be convinced of its value. But before we join in the chorus of approval, we should be clear as to what is adolescence? And who is an adolescent? Adolescence is the critical period of human development manifested at the biological, psychological and social levels of interaction marking the end of childhood and setting the

foundation for maturity. It is a transition period characterised by an erratic, emotional, unstable and unpredictable individual and this transition demands for adjustment which is intensified with the adolescent stepping into the threshold of work. Moreover, out of school adolescents are those who cannot participate in the formal conventional schools in stipulated hours of the day as large number of them are engaged in productive labour.

Accomplishment in the workplace is quite important for an adolescent as the individual's vocation transforms his whole life style and also confines his

* Assistant Professor, NUEPA, New Delhi 110016

status and role in the society. Unrealistic vocational goals and misplaced workers lead to dissatisfaction and unhappiness. India's transition to knowledge economy requires a new generation of educated and skilled people to be able to respond to the needs of the labour market. The current education system is meeting the demands of semi-skilled and skilled human resource to a limited extent while ignoring the demands of unorganised sector of the economy which provide employment to more than 90 per cent of the work force. Neither the formal system allow the leeway of continuing education for workers who need further knowledge and skills nor is there any mechanism by which the training acquired through informal system could be recognised. The changing nature of work requires adolescents to be 'work ready' to ensure economic competitiveness in a global context and lead change in organisations. In this backdrop, young people need to be geared up in a wider and progressive framework to align with rapidly changing and technically oriented vocational demands of the society. The education of out of school adolescents need to be addressed separately. It must be linked with empowerment (enhancing self esteem, self-confidence), survival and employment.

Demographic Situation

India has a population of about 24.03 crores adolescents in the age group of 10-19 years in 2011, which is similar to the adolescent population of 24.15 crores in 2006 (Population Projection for India and States, 2001-2026). Out of these, we have about 3.04 crores

illiterates and 4.77 crores literate below primary level. The number of left school adolescents is huge amounting to 4.99 crores in case of younger adolescents (10-14 years) and 2.81 crores in case of older adolescents (15-19 years). So we have a target of addressing to the diverse needs of 7.8 crores out of school adolescents (NSS 61st round).

Despite the increasing trends in enrolment ratio there are continuous drop outs at each level of education. The dropout rate is progressive with each level of education as is evident from 2006-07 data, which shows that a large number of adolescents (60 per cent) drop out at the secondary level and about 45 per cent at elementary level, while the drop out rate at primary level is 25 per cent (Manpower Profile, 2009). With huge number of drop outs and poor quality of schooling, one of the major concerns for adolescents is the world of work. Entering into the world of work without completing their minimum required education, lowers their self-confidence and self-esteem, deteriorating their personality. It is this group that needs special interventions for their wholesome development, exploring their talents, providing awareness about the available opportunities in the world of work, developing their abilities and providing skill training for work and life.

An analysis of workforce participation rates across region and gender indicates that the rate of work force participation is greater in the case of rural population of adolescents as compared to urban population. Whereas the proportion of workforce participation is more among males of older adolescents (15-19 yrs.) both in rural (47.5 per cent) and urban

region (30.4 per cent) as against the females in rural (27.1 per cent) and urban region (10.5 per cent) in the same age group (Manpower profile, 2009).

With regards to the labour force participation rate, it is found to be 36.8 per cent among the older adolescents (15-19 years) where the rural population (40.7 per cent) outnumbers the urban population (25.5 per cent). Figures on the gender variable indicate that the proportion (47.3 per cent) of males is just double the proportion (24.0 per cent) of females (Man power profile 2009).

NSS 62nd round reveals the abysmal situation of vocational training, indicating only 6.1 per cent of adolescents in the age group 15-19 years who received vocational training (formal and informal) including one per cent who were receiving formal vocational training. A huge number (93.3 per cent) of adolescents did not receive any vocational training formal or informal. There is no evidence of gender disparity in respect to the proportion of those who have received vocational training and those who have not. However, rural-urban differences are evident among those who received vocational training indicating 5.7 per cent rural persons against 7.4 per cent urban persons. The proportion of rural males (5.9 per cent) and females (5.4 per cent) who received vocational training either through formal or informal means is much less than the proportion of urban males (7.6 per cent) and females (7.2 per cent). The statistics point to the immediate need of training opportunities for both rural and urban areas but with a priority to the rural areas.

Moreover, India's declining dependency ratio from 0.73 in 2001 to 0.59 by 2011 presents a sharp contrast to other countries (Technical Group on Population Projections). This ratio would give a comparative advantage on cost and competitiveness over other countries with high dependency ratio. In addition to this, India has an edge over others for another 25-30 years due to the demographic bulge in the age bracket of 15-29 years and possessing the youngest work force with a median age below China and other OECD countries. India would have a skilled surplus of 47 million and become a global reservoir of skilled persons against the skilled manpower shortage of 56.5 million by 2020 (US Census Bureau, BCG. 2008). This demographic dividend needs to be harnessed which if equipped with adequate skills would enable the young people to seize global employment opportunities in the future.

Way Forward

To respond the demand and supply mismatch on several counts and burgeoning demand of skilled workforce, vocational training system needs to be revamped keeping in view the diverse needs of the heterogeneous population of the adolescents.

Education and training needs to be integrated and seen as a lifelong process in order to enhance the quality of life. Currently, there is no provision of credit transfer among lifelong learning institutions in India. There is need to develop close interface with all the sectors of education and formulate strategies for accreditation and recognition of

prior learning to facilitate a seamless path for learners and enhance their opportunities. The policy in this regard must be defined and linked to the mainstream educational policy agenda.

Pertaining to the curricular reforms, the curriculum should focus on developing generic abilities in terms of instrumental, interpersonal and systemic competencies. The societal trends, burdened with absurdity, delineate the context and the paradigm in which our future educational system would have to be entrenched. Given the whole host of possible vocations and changes in the nature of work, there is need to stimulate broader range of competencies permeating the whole curriculum to successfully accomplish generic rather than specific tasks, so that the adolescent may be empowered within the changed paradigm. Hence, dovetailing of generic skills with the vocational skills is required. Vocational education should entail designing a broader educational curriculum and widening the learning horizon.

Introducing work-oriented programmes into the curricula becomes intriguing, which would ease transition from school to work, lead to change in attitudes and help in developing an ability to participate in the life of the community. Exposing students to the world of work, which helps to sensitise them towards various kinds of work, ranging from manual labour to intellectual and those who perform these tasks. Curricular restructuring in this regard would include mandatory engagement of adolescents with different kinds of work, which would make them ready for their entry into the world of work.

There is need to synchronise the world of work more closely with educational institutions. Work orientation needs to be introduced at all stages of education with different objectives. Primary and upper primary stage should focus on developing positive attitude towards manual labour, observation of work situations and production processes, experimentation with materials, tools and techniques, involving handicrafts, using indigenous and low cost materials. While at secondary level it would be a pre-vocational programme followed by highly specialised vocational courses at the senior secondary level.

The formal curriculum must relate to the life of work and provide for possible entry points for adolescents to continue studying while working. It should also have a wide range of programmes that are flexible to suit all target groups. Short term courses that promote hands-on learning with emphasis on knowledge and skills need to be introduced more for those who cannot attend long term courses. With the increasing demand for skilled and multi skilled labour the concept of multi skilling is quite promising in the wake of critical skill shortage, thereby increasing the flexibility and productivity of labour force.

The capacity of organised sector to absorb additional accrual to the labour force taking into account the current inflection on modernisation and automation is limited. In other words the overwhelming upsurge in the labour force will have to be adjusted in the unorganised sector. It is the unorganised sector which occupies substantial place in the Indian economy

and bolsters entrepreneurial activity. Given the huge size of India's informal workforce, the need to address the skills of informal sector is more critical than any other. Systematic efforts need to be made to impart training in skill development and upgradation, required by the unorganised sector which needs to be formally introduced in the curricula and training courses. As employment opportunities in the formal sector shrink, the acquisition of entrepreneurial skills and self employment becomes a major imperative in the design of vocational training programmes. Entry into self employment and entrepreneurship depends more on entrepreneurial behaviour than on mastery of specific vocational skills. Education for enterprise would be an effort to introduce knowledge and skill elements into the curriculum related to entrepreneurship, self employment and small business development. So, skills for entrepreneurship may be incorporated in the vocational education programme, so that it may be a source of self employment and would also generate employment for many others.

Assuring employability of potential trainees begin with effective guidance and counselling to assist the adolescents to make realistic choices about the training programmes and vocations in relation to their aptitudes, personality characteristics and academic background. Since lack of proper and adequate information lead to career dilemma and wrong decisions, professionally trained vocational counsellors are required in every school, so as to assess the aptitudes of students

and provide extensive information about the world of work. Moreover, adolescents from the rural areas move to urban areas in search of jobs. This phenomenon of urbanisation is a reality that vocational education programme must take into consideration. Career counselling services need to be designed to address the inimitable vocational needs of these young people from rural background. These services would help in preparing those who plan to leave their rural dwelling in pursuit of jobs in an urban milieu and also draw their attention to the worth of vocations that may be pursued within the rural milieu after training and education.

A typical problem of our vocational training system, in general, is that there is no provision of flexibility to tailor the courses around local vocational training demands. Hence, skill mapping needs to be done to identify the local requirement of skills, so that workforce may be prepared for the specific local requirements and jobs.

Skill testing, certification and equivalence are important for employability as this would open avenues for entrepreneurship, recognition for future skill development in the globalised world. In reference to lifelong learning it is important to transform workplace into an educational set up and a centre of vocational education and certification.

Another major limitation of the vocational education and training is the lack of involvement of industry in planning and running of training system. The industrial associations that integrate small and micro-enterprises of the unorganised economy are not

involved in the state training systems. Hence, industries should be involved in planning and running VET system since they are the ultimate source of placement.

Conclusion

On a sustainable basis vocational training system must be labour- market relevant, efficient, diverse and of high quality. Since the issues pertaining to vocational training are multifaceted, therefore formulation of effective policy for vocational education and training would require an interdisciplinary approach with effective partnership of all stake holders and coordinated effort of the Centre, State, NGOs and private

bodies. It is the need of the hour to develop productive manpower as per international competency standards through formal and non-formal programmes and at the same time give recognised qualifications to the large population of unemployed young people through skill training for wage/self employment. Hence, there is a need to explore the various approaches to reach the adolescent world beyond schooling within the framework of lifelong learning which covers formal, non-formal and informal patterns of education and attempts to integrate and articulate all structures and stages of education along the temporal and spatial dimensions.

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