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Vocational Education: Relevance and Reality

Abstract

The scenario of vacationalisation in India dates back to the colonial period. After independence many of the committees and commissions suggested and endorsed vocationalisation in different forms.

The present article focuses on providing a status quo of vocational education in India with a special mention to the National Skill Qualifications Framework (NSQF) and its proceedings the mention of some cases of states like Haryana and Himachal Pradesh strengthens the plan of implementation of NSQF in the country.

1. Context

The discourse around vocationalisation in India dates back to the colonial period – ostensibly to curb 'educational over-production' which was caused by the 'tendency of individuals from rural areas to continue in school past the capacity of labour markets to absorb them'. Post-independence, the Mudaliar Commission recommended diversification of courses at the secondary stage while the Kothari Commission suggested vocationalization of the two years of higher secondary education, after ten years of general education. Vocational education was proposed as the solution to many educational problems: the unbridled demand for higher education could be controlled, the financial crisis in education would be eased by reducing higher education budgets, and unemployment among college and secondary school graduates would be reduced (Tilak, 1988).

The National Policy on Education 1968 recommended that facilities for vocational education be increased, to 'conform broadly to requirements of the developing economy and real employment opportunities'. It also recommended diversification to cover a large number of fields such as agriculture, industry, trade and commerce, medicine and public health, home management, arts and crafts, secretarial training, etc. (Government of India, 1968).

The National Policy on Education 1986 Modified 1992 devoted an entire section to vocationalisation. It stated that the 'introduction of systematic, well planned and rigorously implemented programmes of vocational education is critical in the proposed educational reorganisation' and recommended efforts to provide children 'at the higher secondary level with generic vocational courses which cut across several occupational fields and which are not occupation specific'. Vocational education was recommended as a distinct stream, 'ordinarily provided after the secondary stage, but keeping the scheme flexible, they may also be available after class VIII', with emphasis on development of attitudes, knowledge, and skills for entrepreneurship and self-employment. Responsibility was to be shared by the government and private sectors. Among other recommendations, the policy also suggested, 'under predetermined conditions', lateral

entry into courses of general, technical and professional education through 'appropriate bridge courses', and that the government review its recruitment policy 'to encourage diversification at the secondary level' (Government of India, 1992).

The focus on vocational education is not limited to our country alone - in the middle of the twentieth century, the 'overwhelmingly academic bias' of schools led to reforms in several countries attempting to bring courses of study closer to life. Part of the attempt was to inculcate a sense of the dignity of labour, and encourage a wider population to take up non-elitist work in later life. With scientific and technological advancements, the world of work was also changing, requiring 'more literate, sophisticated, knowledgeable and highly skilled workers'. This needed a synchrony between formal education andinformal, on-the-job training. In a sense, vocationalisation of education became dependent on the priorities of the economy - attempts were made to provide a good match between the content and processes of education, and the rapidly changing needs of the labour market, which only highlighted the complexity and difficulty of the endeavor (Burns, 2002). However, the resultant split between 'general' and 'vocational' streams came with its own inherent problems, most notably the reluctance of parents and learners to opt for the vocational stream. The next section attempts to present the reasons for this reluctance.

2. Poor status of vocational education

Historically, men of leisure with assured independent means opted for liberal education the world over. Education was accessed only by a minoritytill the Industrial Revolution, while those who had to make a living as soon as possible were provided with the basic R's. This would enable them to perform their jobs and equip them with skills for the world of work.Liberal education was not utilitarian – it was meant to train the mind and cultivate the intellect; it was an end in itself.Existing social stratification was reflected in the educational belief that there was a clear distinction between mental and manual work. Liberal education prepared the 'gentleman ideal' who took up elite, powerful jobs. These gentlemen were considered to be 'above specialisation' but in possession of a mind that could apply itself flexibly to any subject matter (Lewis, 1998; Dewey, 1916; Hyland, 1993; Sanderson, 1993).

With time, liberal education became more utilitarian. As professions evolved and required a niche study programme, elite institutions preparing doctors, lawyers, etc emerged. However, attaining a general education at school was the means to access higher studies at these institutions, thus effectively closing the doors to those who had been 'streamed' into the vocational curriculum. As a result, liberal education still remained the monopoly of the privileged; those who were 'less academically oriented' or 'unable to cope' were pushed into the vocational stream without catering for the massive disadvantage they entered schooling with.

At the same time, education has been universally recognized as the means for social mobility – thus, liberal education was aspirational and yet available only to the privileged upper classes. This further reinforced the lower status of vocational education and perpetuated social divides.Since, historically, curricular decisions have been taken by a few, vocational education was such as to maintain status quo; the disadvantaged had no say in either the nature of the curriculum or who

should be sent into the vocational stream (Lewis, 1998; Dewey, 1916; Hyland, 1993; Sanderson, 1993). There is sufficient evidence that this kind of streaming has reinforced class and gender inequality with disadvantaged sections of students being pushed towards vocational education (Yonah & Saporta, 2006; Marshall, 1990; Oakes, 1985). This disadvantage continues - Halliday (2004) explains how, even in the current context, academic qualifications provide higher rewards (in terms of wages, status, power and influence, etc). Vocational qualifications are not comparable in this sense, which fails to justify the commitment students have made to these programmes.

A question that needs to be asked at this point is whether this kind of streaming is necessary at all – can academic courses cater for vocational preparation?

3. New vocationalism

With changes in the nature of work, the notion that someone can be prepared for 'a' job was also undergoing change. Dewey (1916) wrote how 'restricted specialism is impossible; nothing could be more absurd than to try to educate individuals with an eye to only one line of activity'. An activity devoid of other influences becomes routine and therefore restricted in terms of innovation and change – no vocation can be defined as being merely a repetition of routine processes ad infinitum.

More than half a century later, Lewis (1998) discussed how the workplace was now defined by 'technological process, and social complexities' and instead of being 'trained' for specific jobs, workers now needed to be 'educated for job flexibility… Because the character of work and jobs has changed, it is felt that traditional job-specific vocational education must be superseded by a new vocationalism'.New vocationalism views vocational education as general education, that is, education for all with a unitary curriculum, one that is not hierarchically ordered and is devoid of tracks. All students pursue academic subjects and all learn about the world of work. In new vocationalism, any division between mental and manual labour is regarded as outmoded and not a basis on which social roles should be constructed.

New vocationalism seeks to integrate vocational and general education by focusing on generic (and therefore transferable from one kind of work to another) competencies necessary for the workplace (e.g. problem solving, team work, learning to learn, etc). It recommends contextualising academic subjects to the world of work, and offering courses in occupational clusters as opposed to single vocational disciplines.The consequence is to be a vocational education that empowers the workers of the future to be risk takers rather than passive instruments of those who control economic interests.

4. Integrated vocational and general education for all

Dewey (1916) negates the assumption that 'discovery of the work to be chosen for adult life is made once and for all at some particular date' as arbitrary, likening such as attempt to Columbus discovering America the moment he set foot on its shore. He further states that through such a 'definitive, irretrievable, and complete choice, both education and the chosen vocation are likely to be rigid, hampering further growth. In so far, the calling chosen will be such as to leave the person concerned in a permanently subordinate position, executing the intelligence of others who have a calling which permits more flexible play and readjustment'.

Lewis (1998) questions whether the aim of education is to prepare an 'expert'

or a'free man and citizen', stating that 'the two kinds of education once given separately to different social classes must be given together to all alike'. Streaming (or multi-tracking) is based on an 'abominable discrimination. The system aims at different goals for different groups of children'... 'the only appropriate 'career education' is learning how to learn, so that one can quickly prepare for new jobs and career opportunities as they come along'. Lewis states that vocational education should be'about work' rather than 'for work'. The latter demands a direct link between the curriculum and jobs available in the market while the former is more 'broadly educative' about the world of work. Education 'about work' should include work experience throughout school years, structured opportunities to experience the real world, along with community projects and preparation for entrepreneurship. He feels that '... good general education is all that employers really want ... and that specific vocational preparation needs to be built upon a generalist foundation rather than constructed in isolation from it'.

Hyland (1993) cites Dewey: 'any scheme for vocational education which takes its point of departure from the industrial regime that now exists, is likely to assume and to perpetuate its divisions and weaknesses, and this to become an instrument in accomplishing the feudal dogma of social predestination'. Hyland adds that 'more importantly, however, the needs of a constantly evolving industrial society can never be met by narrow skills training which neglects aspects of general education'.

Adams & Adams (2011) speak of how the aim of vocational education has been 'relegated' to a 'very narrow form of job training'. They speak of how Dewey saw the integration of vocational and general education as a means for transforming society by inculcating in students not merely an understanding of how machines work but also the science behind the machine and the social implications of its use. They quote Dewey –

An education which acknowledges the full intellectual and social meaning of a vocation would include instruction in the historic background of present conditions; training in science to give intelligence and initiative in dealing with materials and agencies of production; and study of economics, civics, and politics to bring the future worker into touch with the problems of the day and the various methods proposed for its improvement. Above all, it would give individuals the power of readapting to changing conditions so that future workers would not become blindly subject to a fate imposed upon them,

thus also developing the capacity to not only critique and question but also to proactively initiate change for the better. Taking a narrow view of vocational education as training for jobs (to become an electrician, a carpenter, etc) is 'incredibly anti-democratic' and 'redestines' a large number of students to a life void of creativity and individual expression. They cite House (1921) to emphasize that this 'type of vocational education leads to a rigid division of labor in which a few have power and the workers have no understanding about the meaning of their work; workers are exploited by those in power; and vocational education has been institutionalized as a means to reproduce an inequitable social order'.

Buchman and Shwille (1983) reinforce this view by suggesting that 'basing vocational education on actual experience of working at an occupation, and limiting exposure to subjects like science and mathematics to what would actually be useful at

work, would circumscribe the students' aspirations by not exposing them to other theoretical possibilities'.

Sharing a different perspective, Winch (2000) speaks of the fear of undermining the academic nature of general education by integrating vocation education within it. He writes about the

persistent cultural bias, …. , against contaminating educational concerns with such gross matters as work and the economy. Anyone interested in promoting vocational education is thought to be a philistine, concerned only with material gain rather than with higher forms of human achievement. …. this view is a travesty, … our deepest concerns with moral and spiritual well-being are bound up with work, and … any education directed towards the wellbeing of the vast majority who are not going to live the life of the country gentry of yesteryear needs to concern itself with preparation for work in the broadest sense.

A theme that emerges from the literature is that to separate vocational education from its theoretical bases, to see knowledge and understanding as demonstrated in the performance of a specific occupational task, to separate skills and competence from knowledge and understanding raises questions of validity – is it possible to separate the desired behavior from the knowledge, understanding, values and attitudes needed to generate that behavior? Can schooling narrow focus to the vocational aspect of general education and still do a satisfactory job of developing desired capabilities in the learner?

5. Structure and processes for vocational education in Indian schools

The goal set out in the last policy on education was that vocational courses would cover 10 percent of higher secondary students by 1995 and 25 percent by 2000. A Centrally Sponsored Scheme on Vocationalisation of Secondary Education was launched in 1988, under which vocational courses of 2 years' duration were to be provided in general schools at the higher secondary stage. The scheme has since been subsumed under the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyaan (RMSA) in 2014. However, very few students take up the vocational stream; only 4.8% of school students were enrolled in the vocational stream as per 2012 data (Government of India, 2012a). Employment record of those who have undergone vocational training is also poor - among those who got formal training in an institution like Industrial Training Institute (ITI) or other Skill Centers, the unemployment rate was high - at 14.5% - compared to 2.6% overall, according to a survey by the Labour Bureau in 2014 (Varma, 2015).

Among the issues that are associated with vocational educationidentified by the Working Group Report on Secondary and Vocational Education, 12th Five Year Plan (Government of India, 2012) and the National Policy on Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (Government of India, 2015a) are:

a. Pass outs of ITIs and even private vocational education are given certificates distinct from those of general education, making these dead ends. This causes uneven and incomplete preparation for work, relegated to low end skills, thus impeding progression of the students and leading to fewer takers for vocational training. Although policies have created scope for vertical and horizontal mobility, this does not work out well in reality.

b. Redundant and inadequate curriculum and faculty with poor industry and job linkages, and poor quality of transaction and teacher professional development have further hampered implementation.

c. Vocational education is considered the option of last choice – which one joins due to poor performance in the general education stream and after exhausting all other options. It is also linked to economic compulsions to enter the work place at an early age. This results in vocational education and training leading to low end jobs and a low esteem for pass outs of vocational education. There is also a stigma attached to working with one's hands.

d. With more than 90% of the working population employed in the unorganized sector, there is very little idea of what skills are required; there is a paucity of research overall in the area.

As far as school education is concerned, the document detailing the Revised Centrally Sponsored Scheme of Vocationalisation of Secondary Education (MHRD, 2014), while reviewing the present status and need for revision states that:

a. Implementation of vocational education has been non-uniform across the country.

b. Challenges in implementation include the teacher vacancies, and limited scope for their capacity building. Insufficient financial allocation, courses which are rigid and not necessarily need based, insufficient processes for mobility of students across streams, absence of separate management structures, absence of long-term commitment from the governments, and inadequate monitoring are some other challenges.

c. This is coupled with 'the dire need at present for high skilled human resource to sustain the high growth rate of Indian economy and increased possibilities of international demand of skilled manpower, changes in technologies and financial markets, the growing international competition and increasing demand from various segments of population for job-oriented education'.

The Scheme has, so far, across the country, infrastructure for vocational education comprises 21000 sections in 9619 schools, which implies a capacity of about 10 lakh students.

The National Policy on Skill Development was notified in 2009 and the National Policy on National Policy on Skill Development and Entrepreneurship in 2015 (Government of India, 2009 & 2015a). The policies attempted to address the issues plaguing vocational education. Some of the highlights of changes post these policies are:

a. A National Skills Qualification Framework (NSQF) (previously referred to as the National Vocational Education Qualifications Framework or NVEQF) has been developed'aligned to international standards'. This framework not only defines vertical mobility within vocational education by defining levels from class IX onwards through till a doctoral degree, but also provides pathways for horizontal mobility between general and vocational education. It also caters for recognition of prior learning, which, technically, enables persons already in employment to enter an appropriate level of vocational education even if they do not have formal qualifications.

b. Separate vocational schools are to be discouraged since the effort is to mainstream vocational education; sections in existingschools will offer vocational courses.

c. Competency based, credit based,modular curricula have beendeveloped/vettedfor twenty six sectors in consultation with the appropriate Sector Skills Council; the Pandit Sunderlal Sharma Central Institute of Vocational Education (PSSCIVE), a constituent of the National Council for Educational Research and Training has been given the responsibility of developing these curricula.

d. The scheme of studies is plannedas follows:

   i. Levels 1 and 2, which are equivalent to classes IX and X will cover English and one more language (Hindi, Sanskrit or a

regional language), mathematics, science, social sciences and computers in addition to one vocational elective; the vocational elective will carry one-seventh of the weightage in the assessment. At the senior secondary level, equivalent to Levels 3 and 4 of the NSQF, it is proposed that general education cover science, commerce, humanities and vocational elective, while the vocational stream cover general foundation courses (in science, commerce or humanities) and one to two vocational courses.

ii. PSSCIVE had developed curricula for the following sectors - Agriculture; Apparel, Made Ups and Home Furnishings; Automobile; Banking, Insurance and Financial Services; Construction Technology; Electricals and Electronics; Healthcare; IT/IT Enabled Services; Logistic Management; Manufacturing and Processing; Media and Entertainment; Private Security; Retail; Rubber; Telecommunication; Hospitality; Tourism and Hospitality–and vetted curricula for the following - Beauty & Wellness; Physical Education & Sports; Electrical, Mechanical & Electronics Technology; Travel & Tourism.

Thus, the shift in discourse around vocational education in the country is recognizing the futility of narrow focus on training for specific jobs and moving towards situating vocational courses as electives in schools. However,the integration of vocational and general education is still not perceived as a means to assuring our students leave school with holistic capacities which will remain relevant in whatever form the world of work takes in the future.

At the same time, it still remains to be seen how future implementation will pan out, given our past history, including specifically whether vocational education will remain yet another site of exclusion or whether we will be able to make the shift to an integrated approach to vocational and general education.

Pilots have been conducted in Haryana and Himachal Pradesh wherein vocational courses designed based on the NSQF were offered as electives in schools; ten other states have also started a pilot in 2015. Studies examining these in detail are not available. However, preliminary studies show that while a lot of funds, resources and effort has been pumped into the pilots, the lack of a good foundation in elementary education, and the experience of the students who passed out of class XII and took up jobs are both mitigating factors in their success. In addition, planning and monitoring of implementation of vocational education, and concomitant changes in the processes of schooling have yet to be formalized. The structures in place for school education are also not yet involved in the implementation of vocational education. There is a high degree of centralization, and critical shortage of infrastructure and personnel for effective implementation of vocational education. At another level, stereotypes inform choice of vocational courses (e.g. computer courses in English medium, pushing girls and boys towards specific courses according to gender)(Maithreyi, Padmanabhan, Menon & Jha, 2017; Verma, 2017).

6. Conclusion

It would be apt to conclude with quoting Dewey (1916)–

The dominant vocation of all human beings at all times is living -- intellectual

and moral growth. In childhood and youth, with their relative freedom from economic stress, this fact is naked and unconcealed. To predetermine some future occupation for which education is to be a strict preparation is to injure the possibilities of present development and thereby to reduce the adequacy of preparation for a future right employment.... Nothing is more tragic than failure to discover one's true business in life, or to find that one has drifted or been forced by circumstance into an uncongenial calling.

Streaming, of any kind, whether through the child's decision or the school's, whether through vocational guidance or formal aptitude testing, guarantees exclusion and therefore inequity. Also, to make a distinction between education as preparation for life and vocational education as preparation for work is inherently problematic – it implies either general or vocational education is incomplete in itself – it will leave gaps in the individual's development.The only solution is to integrate vocational and general education and have the same rigorous curriculum for all learners.

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