

INVESTING IN INDIA'S YOUTH

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Human resources, Youth, Sports and related issues

With the largest youth population in the world, India faces the difficult task of educating every citizen to become a productive member of society. This goal has become harder with the pandemic: over 320 million learners have been affected and more than 5 million young people are likely to have lost their jobs. Proactive measures need to be taken to resolve this situation. Education can play a vital role in bridging this gap.

India's Right to Education Act guarantees free and compulsory education for the ages of 6 to 14 years, and is based on books and written examinations. However, evidence shows that many people develop 21st century skills on the job, or from courses that focus on practical application of skills. This indicates that vocational education can be a route for many to gain specific skillsets and knowledge which they can directly apply in their jobs. Such education formats are referred to as Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET).

In India, the skills development ecosystem has undergone rapid changes and improvements over the last decade. The National Skill Development Policy was launched in 2009 and revamped in 2015, recognising the challenge of skilling with speed and high standards. The Skill India Mission was launched soon after, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced his vision for making India the "skill capital" of the world.

Since then, India has laid the foundation for delivering on this vision of making quality skills development programmes available to the youth, but also faced various challenges. UNESCO's State of the Education Report for India 2020, published this week, focuses on vocational education and training and showcases the growth of the skills development sector, along with emerging challenges. It also provides practical recommendations to ensure that policy is effectively implemented. One of the biggest challenges for expanding the reach of TVET-related courses has been the lack of aspiration and stigma attached to jobs such as carpentry and tailoring. Considerable effort, including information campaigns involving youth role models, would go a long way in improving the image of vocational education. At the same time, common myths around TVET need to be debunked. Research is now proving that TVET graduates for entry level jobs can get paid as much as university graduates, and for some jobs can even surpass them. Moreover, students from vocational streams typically take less time to find jobs as compared to university graduates.

The report emphasises the need for expanding evidence-based research. High-quality research based on careful data-gathering and analytics can add value to all aspects of TVET planning and delivery but is especially useful for creating evidence behind the value of vocational education. For instance, proving the business case of apprenticeship to employers can push them to hire more apprentices. Considering that many employers are unable to find skilled candidates for jobs, promoting skills development and hiring skilled workers can make the economy stronger.

The new National Education Policy (NEP) aims to provide vocational education to 50% of all learners by 2025. Schools are encouraged to provide students access to vocational education from Grade 6 onwards and to offer courses that are aligned to the local economies and can benefit local communities. This will be possible only if the existing skills development systems are leveraged effectively. Hence, for the vision of the NEP to be fulfilled, a robust coordination mechanism for inter-ministerial cooperation is necessary for bringing the skills development and vocational education systems together.

This will not be an easy task but UNESCO, through its policy instruments, is committed to supporting the Indian government in capitalising on the country's demographic dividend. In these difficult times, TVET is certainly a key tool to help get the economy, and people's lives, back on track.

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