

# INDIA NEEDS A REALISTIC MODEL OF EDUCATION TO RAISE EMPLOYMENT

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Education and related issues

Over the years, we have observed in India a visible increase in the number of children enrolled in schools. But at the same time, learning levels haven't grown. Pratham's Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2021 shows ([bit.ly/3Jj3HLZ](https://bit.ly/3Jj3HLZ)) that a higher number of older children (ages 15-16) are in school now, with 67.4% students enrolled in government schools (compared to 57.4% in 2018).

In the coming years, it is likely that we will see an even larger number of youth graduating with high school certificates and degrees. These youth are more likely to aspire for jobs in government or the private sector, with hardly anyone interested in agriculture or labour-based work. Yet, if we observe employment trends in India, over 80% of all workers are hired by the informal economy. Put two and two together, and it becomes painfully apparent that most youth are unable to fulfil the aspirations they had outlined for themselves.

Take for instance the youth trained by Pratham Education Foundation's skilling centres. In 2015, over 85% of the youth enrolled had dropped out of the school system before grade 12. In 2021, however, less than 35% of the enrolled trainees were drop-outs, while the rest had completed grade 12 education. The eligibility criteria, content, courses and sectors have essentially remained the same over the last six years. Yet we can see that more 'qualified' youth are choosing to pursue a pathway designed for 'drop-outs'. These youth who typically come from low-income families do not have the luxury of investing in higher education and advanced learning, given the opportunity cost. In such a situation, the idea that you can be connected from your village to a training centre and then to the workforce in less than 6 months is a more desirable alternative. There is a back-story which needs to be highlighted here.

Despite the higher rate of graduation from schools, most youth do not possess the skills expected of them by prospective employers. Much of this can be attributed to an emphasis on exams and the lack of focus on learning outcomes ([bit.ly/3yVHK0M](https://bit.ly/3yVHK0M)). Trainees who join Pratham centres have spent 3-7 years unsuccessfully looking for jobs after graduation (their median age of enrolment is 24-25), with limited guidance and awareness about opportunities. For years, these youth were conditioned to believe that working as an electrician or a housekeeping attendant is not admirable and they turned to vocational centres only as a last resort. The unfortunate reality is that there are millions in India who choose to stay unemployed instead of pursuing a vocation-based job. We need to shift from a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to one that is tailored to match local realities.

The jobs of today are not the ones that existed two decades ago. Most professional degrees are designed to employ a minority within urban locations and require significant investment in academic education. Those who don't pass the filters must settle for jobs which they believe are 'below' their qualification level, resulting in a vicious cycle of disgruntled employment. For more evidence of this, turn to the rapidly growing gig worker economy, where we see scores of young people with college degrees signing up to work as delivery partners, cab drivers and doorstep service providers.

We have been typecasting different types of jobs without accounting for their availability and accessibility. Rather than building a false narrative, we need to recognize the real jobs that the country has to offer. From policy to practice, the next advocacy mission should be for dignity of

labour.

The National Education Policy's call for introduction of vocational training into the education system offers the opportunity to address an information asymmetry which is painfully visible in communities. If you walk into any rural high school, you will find students who say they wish to become doctors. But most of these students struggle with academics and are unlikely to clear the required exams. However, what they're not aware of is that their journey into the medical sector doesn't have to end. By spending 2-3 months in a vocational training centre, they would be able to work in the sector as a general duty assistant or a home nurse, with limited financial investment. We need a system that enables teachers to counsel students on the value of various vocations without undermining these in favour of 'advanced' higher education.

Vocational training was originally designed to help those who fell behind in the education race. But it's difficult to build a future by thinking you're where you are because you fell behind. The system is forcing youth to play catch-up in a game they're going to lose anyway because the larger battle they confront is the dichotomy between meeting short-term income needs and keeping their long-term aspirations alive.

The goal should be a level playing field that allows a match of aspirations and abilities, without discrimination of learners based on income levels, marginalization or socioeconomic limitations. If we are to assure young people dignity of labour, then as we enter this next phase of post-pandemic education, we need a model that directly serves the workforce without undermining the value of any type of work.

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