

LEARNING TO COMPETE: ON SKILL INDIA

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

In 2013, India's skill agenda got a push when the government introduced the National Skills Qualification Framework (NSQF). This organises all qualifications according to a series of levels of knowledge, skills and aptitude, just like classes in general academic education. For instance, level 1 corresponds to Class 9 (because vocational education is only supposed to begin in secondary school in many countries, including India). Levels 1, 2, 3 and 4 correspond to Classes 9, 10, 11 and 12, respectively. Levels 5-7 correspond to undergraduate education, and so on. For each trade/occupation or professional qualification, course content should be prepared that corresponds to higher and higher level of professional knowledge and practical experience.

The framework was to be implemented by December 27, 2018. The Ministry mandated that all training/educational programmes/courses be NSQF-compliant, and all training and educational institutions define eligibility criteria for admission to various courses in terms of NSQF levels, by that time.

In this article, we look at NSQF implementation through the prism of national skill competitions, or India Skills, a commendable initiative of the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (MSDE). Twenty-seven States participated in India Skills 2018, held in Delhi. Maharashtra led the medals tally, followed by Odisha and Delhi. Now, teams will be selected to represent India at the 45th World Skills Competition, scheduled in Russia this year. It was also heartening that the Abilympics was included in India Skills 2018, for Persons with Disabilities.

However, there are two priorities requiring action before the next round of India Skills is held. There are five pillars of the skills ecosystem: the secondary schools/polytechnics; industrial training institutes; National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC)-funded private training providers offering short-term training; 16 Ministries providing mostly short-term training; and employers offering enterprise-based training. From which training programmes and NSQF courses did participants come to the competition? The answers to this would hold the key to improve Skill India government programmes dramatically.

Meanwhile, the India Skills competition has provided evidence that many reforms are critical and urgent. We have advocated these reforms in the Sharda Prasad Expert Group report, submitted to the MSDE in 2016.

India Skills was open to government industrial training institutes, engineering colleges, Skill India schemes, corporates, government colleges, and school dropouts. Skill India is understood to mean courses that are compliant with the NSQF. A majority of the participants were from corporates (offering enterprise-based training) and industrial training institutes; only less than 20% were from the short-term courses of the NSDC. Neither industrial training institutes nor corporates' courses are aligned with the NSQF.

This points to the need for more holistic training and the need to re-examine the narrow, short-term NSQF-based NSDC courses to include skills in broader occupation groups, so that trainees are skilled enough to compete at the international level. If India Skills 2018 was only open for the NSQF-aligned institutions, it would have been a big failure. This indicates that the NSQF has not been well accepted or adopted across India. One reason for this is that unlike for general academic education, which requires the completion of certain levels of certification before further progression is permitted, there is no clear definition of the course curriculum within the NSQF that enables upward mobility. There is no connection of the tertiary level vocational courses to

prior real knowledge of theory or practical experience in a vocational field, making alignment with the NSQF meaningless. Efforts to introduce new Bachelor of Vocation and Bachelor of Skills courses were made, but the alignment of these UGC-approved Bachelor of Vocation courses was half-hearted. There is no real alignment between the Human Resource Development Ministry (responsible for the school level and Bachelor of Vocation courses) and the Ministry of Skill Development (responsible for non-school/non-university-related vocational courses).

We must also reduce complications caused by too many Sector Skill Councils (SSCs) anchoring skill courses. World Skills holds competitions in construction and building technology, transportation and logistics, manufacturing and engineering technology, information and communication technology, creative arts and fashion, and social and personal services. To cater to these sectors, 19 SSCs participated in India Skills 2018 as knowledge partners with the help of industry or academic institutions. But India has 38 SSCs (earlier it had 40). Why did the others not participate? The first reason is that the representation of their core work was done by the other SSCs. For example, we have four SSCs for manufacturing: iron and steel, strategic manufacturing, capital goods, and, infrastructure equipment. In effect these are treated as one in World Skills courses. As we had proposed, there should be just one SSC called the Machinery and Equipment Manufacturing Council, in line with the National Industrial Classification of India. Similarly, there is no reason to have four SSCs (instead of one) each of textile, apparel made-ups and home furnishing, leather and handicrafts.

It was a mistake to create 40 SSCs. Outcomes have shown that they have been ineffective. If we want Skill India trainees to win international competitions and if we want competitors to come from schemes of the Ministry, we must find a way to provide broader skills in broader occupational groups.

The second, and related, reason is that the other SSC courses were not comprehensive enough for students to compete. Most of their NSDC-SSC- approved training does not produce students who can showcase “holistic” skills for broad occupational groups in such competitions. This takes us back to the point made in our report: sectors should be consolidated in line with the National Industrial Classification of India. This will improve quality, ensure better outcomes, strengthen the ecosystem, and help in directly assessing the trainee’s competence. It might also bring some coherence to our skills data collection system.

India could learn a lesson from Germany, which imparts skills in just 340 occupation groups. Vocational education must be imparted in broadly defined occupational skills, so that if job descriptions change over a youth’s career, she is able to adapt to changing technologies and changing job roles. Skill India needs a sharp realignment, if India is to perform well in the World Skills competition later this year.

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India has the technological capacity, the financial resources, and the need for a simple, transparent basic income scheme

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