

Walking the Skill-development Tightrope

Vocational training needs to be the lead character in India's growth story, writes **Sanjeev Duggal**

Well begun is half done, goes the old English adage. It certainly holds true of the Skill India mission, a much needed initiative that seeks to chart a new course for India. In recent years, the government has brought in a slew of important policy changes in the area of skilling. Over 1,500 courses have been aligned to the National Skill Qualification Framework (NSQF), and comprehensive reforms to the Apprenticeship Act could also be a game-changer. Further, the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship has signed MoUs with various ministries to leverage the existing infrastructure and opportunities for skill development

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across sectors. It has also identified 52 'Skill Centres' in Indian Railways premises, 12 of which are already operational.

Yet, while Skill India is gradually moving towards its end goals, a quick look at the journey so far suggests the need to hasten its pace.

It trained more than 10 million youth in 2015-16, 36.8 per cent more than the previous year. However, it will take every bit of sincerity and effort to meet the target of training 400 million workers by 2022. In turn, this will be a key factor in the success of flagship programmes like Make in India, Digital India, and Smart Cities.

Walking a tightrope

With 75 per cent of its population falling in the working age group of 15-59, and with 18 per cent of the world's entire working population, much has been said about India's demographic dividend. But here lies the catch: demographics are not only India's biggest strength, but also,



potentially, its biggest vulnerability. No matter how large or fast-growing the workforce, for it to bring social and economic progress, there must be enough people who possess the right skills, and who live in the right places.

While India's overall talent pool is growing, its quality falls well short of global standards. Research indicates that only 43 per cent of India's youth are 'fully employable' – a major concern, especially given the growing influx of foreign brands that are looking to partner with the Make in India programme. Equally, while the government has been concentrating its skilling initiatives on rural areas, many rural youth – even those who participate in such programmes – are hesitant to shift out of their comfort zone, and into the cities. There is also a striking imbalance between low numbers of skilled workers and relatively few jobs for low- or medium-skilled workers.

Thus, without the right 'skill treatment', the demographic dividend may just end up being a demographic disaster. To simply ignore the problem would be disastrous, because many of today's youth are caught between the devil and the deep blue sea: as India moves towards having a 1-billion workforce in 2050, many jobs will

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be made redundant by automation and robotics.

Stepping up the game

Skill development simply has to be the lead character in India's growth story – but this is possible only if the country promotes and invests in vocational education in a far bigger way than it does today. For most people, vocational training is a mere afterthought when they fail to find a suitable job, or worse still, no job at all. The biggest roadblocks here are societal mindsets, and a historical preference for academic courses that, for the middle classes, link up to certain career options.

The problem, then, is really two-fold: the lack of a comprehensive policy framework to enable vocational education, and mindsets that do not see it as a viable alternative to purely academic courses.

Technology to the rescue

A boom in mobile apps and an ever-growing number of smart-phone users are blessings in disguise. Combined, they are pushing growth in ed-tech (education technology), which aids the cause of skill development through the use of mobile apps. In recent years, ed-tech players have come a long way, widening their focus on technical courses and vocational education. New courses for beauticians, electricians and plumbers, among others, are deepening the reach of Skill India by making online learning easy and accessible. Eventually, this translates into more work and income for many people.

It will not be long before technology enables and empowers millions of people to supplement their income through tech solutions. Take, for instance, taxi drivers who – thanks to the growing usage of app-based aggregation services like Uber – have seen their earnings skyrocket. Similar trends are likely to emerge in other areas as Digital India widens its base, and at the same time, there will be rising demand for new, multidisciplinary digital skills. If skill development in these areas can keep pace with the evolution of technology, and if training can align better with emerging job opportunities, some of the worst-case demographic scenarios can be averted.

Ultimately, then, even as skilling needs to be occurring on a war footing, it will take concerted effort from the government and the private sector to move India ahead on its growth story. ■



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