

Skill-Oriented Education for a Liberalised Economy - The Case for India



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Abstract

India's demographic shift presents both opportunities and challenges as the nation transitions into a knowledge-based economy. With over 500 million people under the age of 25, India's workforce must be equipped with the right skills to compete in the globalised world. However, the current education system, especially at the secondary and senior secondary levels, requires reform to meet the demands of a liberalised economy. This article explores the need for a flexible and skill-oriented education system that can enhance India's economic competitiveness. Special emphasis is placed on policy planning for secondary and senior secondary education and its role in preparing India's youth for the labour market. Additionally, the challenges and strategies for aligning India's workforce with global economic trends are discussed.

Keywords: Education reform, skill-oriented education, India's workforce, knowledge economy, policy planning

1. Introduction

India, with over half of its population - more than 500 million people - being younger than 25 is poised to become the world's most populous nation by 2050 (NASSCOM & McKinsey, 2005). Over the next five years, India will be responsible for nearly a quarter of the global increase in the working-age population. Although India holds almost a third of the available labour supply in low-cost countries, the perception of an unlimited supply of employable human resources is changing. India's growing shortage of skilled workers results largely from workforce development and education systems that fail to meet the needs of its evolving economy (NASSCOM & McKinsey, 2005).

India's workforce must develop market-driven skills to capitalise on globalisation opportunities and maintain economic growth. The nation's ongoing shift from an agricultural-based economy to one led by manufacturing and services industries requires a workforce adept in problem-solving, communication, teamwork, and technological literacy.

2. Policy Challenges and the Knowledge Sector

India's knowledge sector, particularly through the growth of business process outsourcing (BPO) and knowledge process outsourcing (KPO), presents new challenges for policy planners. This sector has seen significant expansion in recent years, contributing to economic growth and job creation. However, while India's higher education institutions have contributed to the sector's growth, much of the focus has been on already educated segments of society, bypassing the vast population of unskilled labourers who remain integral to the economy.

To sustain its advantage in a globalised world, India must align its workforce with the demands of a knowledge-driven economy. This alignment requires not only educational reforms but also a fundamental change in the perception of vocational training and its importance in the larger economic context. Despite the emphasis on higher education, many graduates find themselves ill-equipped for the demands of the labour market. A 2021 report from McKinsey reveals that a staggering 60% of employers in India are struggling to find candidates with the necessary skills, particularly in areas like data analysis, digital literacy, and problem-solving. This disconnect indicates that a re-evaluation of educational strategies is urgently needed.

2.1 Skills Gap and Economic Implications

A key issue is the contradiction between India serving primarily as a low-cost labour market while simultaneously aiming to align with international labour standards. For instance, the World Bank's 2022 report underscores the need for educational reforms to close the skills

gap in India, particularly in the informal sector where 93% of the workforce is employed (World Bank, 2022). The report highlights that without significant investment in skill development, India risks having a better-educated workforce that remains unemployable due to mismatches in skills and labour market needs.

Moreover, the focus on low-cost labour can stifle innovation and productivity improvements, which are crucial for long-term economic growth. While sectors such as BPO have thrived by leveraging India's vast, low-cost workforce, the sustainability of this model is questionable as global standards for service quality and efficiency continue to rise. Countries like the Philippines and Vietnam are also emerging as competitors in the BPO sector, often with more skilled workforces. This means that India must not only retain its competitive edge but also adapt to the changing dynamics of global labour markets.

2.2 The Role of Technology in Skill Development

Technological advancements offer both opportunities and challenges in bridging this skills gap. The rise of automation and artificial intelligence is transforming the nature of work in the knowledge sector. According to a 2023 report by the International Labour Organization (ILO), nearly 40% of jobs in India are at risk of automation, which could exacerbate existing inequalities unless initiative-taking measures are taken to upskill and reskill the workforce.

To address these challenges, India needs to invest in digital skills training at all levels of education. Initiatives such as the Digital India programme aim to increase digital literacy among the population and enhance access to technology, particularly in rural areas. By ensuring that the workforce is equipped with the necessary digital skills, India can improve its competitiveness and better position itself in a knowledge-driven economy.

2.3 Equity in Educational Access

Furthermore, a significant challenge lies in ensuring equitable access to education and vocational training across different socio-economic groups. A study conducted by the NITI Aayog revealed that students from poor backgrounds face substantial barriers to accessing quality education and skill development opportunities (NITI Aayog, 2021).

This disparity is particularly pronounced in rural areas, where educational infrastructure is often lacking, and families may prioritise immediate income-generating activities over long-term educational investments.

To bridge this gap, the government and educational institutions must prioritise policies that promote inclusivity in education. For example, expanding initiatives like the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) to include targeted outreach in rural and underserved communities can help ensure that all individuals have the opportunity to participate in skill development programmes. Creating partnerships with local industries can further enhance the relevance of vocational training, ensuring that programmes are tailored to the specific needs of the local labour market.

India's knowledge sector faces significant policy challenges that require urgent attention. By addressing the skills gap, promoting technological integration in education, and ensuring equitable access to vocational training, India can transform its workforce to meet the demands of a knowledge-driven economy. Policymakers must adopt a comprehensive approach that not only focuses on higher education but also values and invests in vocational training as a critical component of economic development. Only through such comprehensive reforms can India hope to maintain its competitive edge in the global marketplace and effectively harness its demographic dividend. Policy Planning for Secondary and Senior Secondary Education

2.4 Importance of Secondary and Senior Secondary Education

In the era of liberalisation, there has been a significant shift from theoretical education to more vocationally-oriented programs designed to produce a trained labour force. As the global economy becomes more competitive, skills and knowledge in information and communication technology (ICT) have become essential (National Knowledge Commission, 2008). Secondary and senior secondary education provide critical skills necessary for further learning and training, particularly in fields such as technology, entrepreneurship, and science.

The demand for skilled workers in sectors such as IT, healthcare, and manufacturing continues to grow. According to the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC), it is estimated that India will require approximately 109 million skilled workers in the construction sector alone by 2025. This burgeoning demand highlights the importance of vocational education at the secondary level to equip students with industry-relevant skills.

Countries with advanced secondary education systems are better positioned to benefit from ICT and the knowledge revolution, and India must follow suit to remain competitive (National Knowledge Commission, 2008). For example, Finland's education system, renowned for its emphasis on vocational training, prepares students to meet the needs of a modern economy effectively. By offering practical training alongside academic learning, Finland produces graduates who are not only knowledgeable but also equipped with firsthand experience that

is highly valued in the job market.

Excellent quality secondary and senior secondary education fosters positive social attitudes and equips young people with the skills to participate fully in the globalised economy. Programs that integrate life skills, critical thinking, and teamwork into the curriculum can enhance students' employability and foster a more dynamic workforce. In addition to technical skills, soft skills such as communication, adaptability, and problem-solving are increasingly sought after by employers.

According to a 2021 McKinsey report, 93% of employers in India stated that they prefer candidates with strong soft skills alongside technical expertise.

Incorporating vocational training into the secondary education curriculum not only addresses immediate labour market needs but also contributes to long-term economic stability. By nurturing a skilled workforce, India can enhance its competitiveness on the global stage, driving innovation and fostering sustainable economic growth. Thus, policymakers must prioritise investments in secondary and senior secondary education, ensuring that these institutions can effectively prepare students for the evolving demands of the workforce.

2.5 Why This is Crucial for India

India's transition to a knowledge-based economy will be determined by the ability of its people to create, share, and use knowledge effectively. The rapid pace of technological advancement and digital transformation necessitates a workforce that is not only educated but also agile and capable of adapting to change. India must develop knowledge workers capable of driving innovation and growth to achieve this. The education system must be flexible, promoting creativity and aligning with the needs of the global economy (National Knowledge Commission, 2008).

Investment in secondary and tertiary education, particularly in vocational education and training (VET), is essential to ensuring that India's workforce remains competitive. The National Policy on Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (2015) outlines a vision for fostering a skilled workforce capable of supporting India's economic aspirations. This policy aims to create a robust skill ecosystem by enhancing vocational training and facilitating partnerships between educational institutions and industries.

The need for a knowledge-driven workforce is underscored by the increasing complexity of global markets. As India seeks to position itself as a major player in the international arena, it must prioritise the development of human capital. According to the World Economic Forum,

countries that invest heavily in education and skills development are better equipped to navigate the challenges posed by globalisation and technological change. This is particularly relevant for India, which is on the cusp of becoming one of the largest economies in the world.

The ability to innovate is critical for economic growth. Countries like South Korea have demonstrated that investing in education and vocational training can lead to significant advancements in technology and innovation. South Korea's emphasis on STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) education has fostered a culture of research and development, enabling the nation to emerge as a global technology leader.

Promoting creativity and entrepreneurial skills at the secondary education level can empower young people to initiate their ventures, contributing to job creation and economic development. The Startup India initiative, launched by the Government of India, aims to promote entrepreneurship by providing funding, mentorship, and training. Incorporating entrepreneurship education into the curriculum can nurture a generation of innovative thinkers capable of tackling contemporary challenges and contributing to economic resilience.

The development of a knowledge-driven workforce is crucial for India's economic future. By investing in secondary and senior secondary education, the country can cultivate a skilled and adaptable workforce that not only meets the demands of the current job market but also drives future growth. As India continues its journey toward becoming a global economic powerhouse, it must embrace educational reforms that foster creativity, innovation, and lifelong learning.

3. Development of Vocational and Skills-Based Education in India

India's vocational education system must evolve to meet the demands of a dynamic global workforce. This involves targeted policy initiatives and curriculum changes to integrate technical and vocational training at both the secondary and senior secondary levels. The National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) has made notable strides in expanding vocational training across the country. Its 2023 report highlights successes in states like Kerala, where modernised training centres now offer courses in renewable energy technologies such as solar energy installation. These programmes equip graduates with the skills necessary to thrive in India's growing renewable energy sector (NSDC, 2023).

Furthermore, the expansion of vocational training can significantly contribute to addressing the skills gap prevalent in the Indian economy. A comprehensive study conducted by NASSCOM suggests that by 2025, India will face a shortage of 29 million skilled workers

across various sectors if current educational practices do not change. Therefore, reorienting the education system to include vocational training is not just an option; it is a necessity to ensure future economic stability.

However, despite these efforts, many challenges persist. For instance, limited access to vocational training in rural areas, where the majority of the population resides, remains a significant obstacle. The 2021 report by the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship indicates that only 40% of rural youth have access to quality vocational training programmes. This lack of access not only perpetuates poverty but also undermines the potential for rural economic development.

Additionally, societal preferences for academic qualifications over vocational training further exacerbate the skills gap. Many parents still perceive vocational education as inferior, leading to a reluctance to encourage their children to pursue these pathways. This cultural bias needs to be addressed through awareness campaigns that highlight the value and potential career opportunities available through vocational training.

The Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) has achieved some success in providing short-term vocational training to rural youth, particularly in states like Rajasthan and Odisha. Courses in mobile repair, plumbing, and e-commerce have enabled thousands of rural youth to secure formal employment (NSDC, 2023). However, the scalability and sustainability of such programmes depend on ongoing investment, industry partnerships, and a shift in societal attitudes towards vocational education.

To address these challenges, there is a pressing need for government policies that not only promote vocational training but also facilitate industry collaboration to ensure the relevance of training programmes. By fostering a culture of skill development, India can better prepare its workforce for the demands of a global economy, thus enhancing productivity and economic growth.

4. Standardisation and Certification for Global Competence

In an increasingly interconnected world, Indian workers must be trained to international standards to compete in the global economy. A key strategy for achieving this is aligning vocational education with international frameworks like the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). The EQF facilitates the recognition of qualifications across borders, making it easier for skilled workers to find employment in other countries. India's recent efforts to align its own qualifications framework with international benchmarks are a step in the right

direction (European Commission, 2022). By adopting global standards, India can ensure that its workers are recognised for their competencies not only domestically but also internationally.

The need for standardisation in vocational education cannot be overstated. Without a unified framework, discrepancies in training quality can arise, leading to a workforce that may not meet the demands of employers. This situation often results in a phenomenon known as skills mismatch, where the skills taught in vocational programmes do not align with the requirements of the job market. According to a 2022 report by the World Economic Forum, nearly 40% of companies in India report difficulties in finding candidates with the right skills, indicating a pressing need for reform.

To bolster this alignment, Indian policymakers should focus on strengthening certification systems to ensure that Indian qualifications meet World Trade Organization (WTO) and International Labour Organization (ILO) standards. These certifications will make Indian workers more competitive globally and more attractive to foreign investors. For instance, a successful model is the National Skill Qualification Framework (NSQF), which aims to standardise skills and enhance the employability of Indian workers. The NSQF aligns with international standards and can facilitate the mobility of Indian workers across borders.

Initiatives that support continuous learning and upskilling are vital for maintaining relevance in a fast-changing job market. The advent of modern technologies and changing industry standards necessitate that workers engage in lifelong learning. As such, vocational education must evolve from being a one-time training opportunity to a continuous development pathway that allows individuals to adapt and thrive in their careers.

Standardisation and certification are therefore crucial elements in enhancing the global competitiveness of India's workforce. By aligning vocational education with international benchmarks and promoting continuous learning, India can better prepare its citizens for the challenges of a globalised economy.

5. Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) in Vocational Education

Public-private partnerships can play a crucial role in the expansion of vocational education, ensuring that training is relevant to industry needs. For example, Germany's dual education system provides a viable model for India. In Germany, students split their time between classroom learning and on-the-job training, which helps ensure that they acquire both theoretical knowledge and practical skills. This model has been successful in reducing youth

In the Indian context, partnerships between the government and private industries can drive innovation in vocational training. For instance, collaborations between vocational institutions and sectors like information technology (IT) or renewable energy can help students gain firsthand experience while ensuring that training programmes are aligned with the needs of rapidly evolving industries. The Cisco Networking Academy, for example, has partnered with various educational institutions in India to provide courses that equip students with critical networking skills, thereby enhancing their employability in the tech sector.

Industry involvement in curriculum design can help ensure that training programmes are up-to-date and relevant. When employers participate in shaping the curriculum, they can provide insights into the skills they seek in prospective employees. This collaboration can also facilitate internships and apprenticeships, giving students real-world experience and increasing their chances of securing employment upon graduation.

Enhancing the quality of vocational education, PPPs can also address funding challenges that many educational institutions face. By leveraging resources from the private sector, educational institutions can improve infrastructure, acquire modern training equipment, and develop innovative training methods. For instance, the Skill India Mission, through its various partnerships, aims to upgrade vocational training infrastructure and expand access to skill development across the country.

To maximise the benefits of public-private partnerships, it is essential to establish clear guidelines and frameworks that facilitate collaboration. Regular evaluations and feedback mechanisms should be put in place to assess the effectiveness of these partnerships and ensure that they continue to meet the changing needs of the labour market.

Public-private partnerships are a vital component of vocational education reform in India. By fostering collaboration between the government and industry, India can enhance the quality and relevance of its vocational training programmes, ultimately preparing a workforce that is equipped to thrive in a competitive global economy.

Table 1: Key Challenges and Solutions for Skill-Oriented Education in India

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Challenge	Proposed Solution	Example
Mismatch Between Education and Industry Needs	Develop skill-based curricula at secondary and senior secondary levels to meet labour market demands.	A 2021 McKinsey report highlights that 60% of employers are struggling to find candidates with the necessary skills.
Underutilised Vocational Training Institutions	Upgrade training institutions to provide skills for emerging sectors, including renewable energy.	The National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) has upgraded vocational centres in Kerala to offer courses in solar energy.
Low Employability in the Global Market	Align educational standards with international benchmarks (e.g., WTO, ILO) through continuous learning and certifications.	The National Skill Qualification Framework (NSQF) helps standardise skills and aligns with global standards.
Rural-Urban Education Divide	ensure equitable access to education and vocational training in rural areas, supported by digital infrastructure.	The Digital India initiative aims to bridge the rural-urban divide by expanding internet connectivity for online learning.

6. Bridging the Rural-Urban Divide

The disparity between rural and urban education systems remains a significant challenge to India's economic development. While urban centres have seen substantial progress in education and training, rural areas lag far behind in terms of access to quality vocational education. A 2022 study by the Ministry of Human Resource Development found that 75% of urban students in Delhi have access to computer-based learning, whereas only 30% of students in rural Bihar have similar opportunities (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2022). This stark contrast illustrates the need for targeted interventions in rural education.

To further bridge the rural-urban divide, policymakers must ensure that vocational training programmes are tailored to the specific needs of rural economies. For example, agricultural training should focus on modern farming techniques, agri-business, and sustainable practices. In this way, vocational education can help rural communities thrive without

necessarily pushing young people into urban-centric industries like manufacturing or IT.

Initiatives like the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) aim to enhance the livelihoods of rural households through skill development and capacity building. By focusing on the unique challenges faced by rural populations, these initiatives can empower individuals with the skills needed to improve their socio-economic conditions.

Investment in digital infrastructure is also essential to bridge this divide. As online learning becomes increasingly popular, ensuring that rural areas have access to reliable internet services is crucial. The Digital India initiative aims to provide internet connectivity to rural regions, thus facilitating access to online vocational training resources. This can help level the playing field, allowing students in rural areas to benefit from the same quality of education and training as their urban counterparts.

Promoting community-based training centres can provide a sustainable model for vocational education in rural areas. These centres can offer locally relevant training programmes while also serving as hubs for entrepreneurship and skill development. By fostering a sense of community ownership and engagement, these centres can enhance the effectiveness of vocational training initiatives.

Bridging the rural-urban divide in vocational education is essential for India's overall economic development. By implementing targeted interventions, investing in infrastructure, and promoting community-based initiatives, India can ensure that all individuals, regardless of their geographical location, have access to quality vocational training opportunities.

Table 2: Future Workforce and Skill Development Targets

Key Target	Goal	Example/Statistic
Workforce Participation by 2025	India's workforce will represent 25% of the global labour market by 2025.	The Twelfth Five-Year Plan (2012-2017) set this target to position India as a key player in the global economy.
Annual Youth Entry into Labour Market	Equip the 12 million young people entering the labour force each year with the necessary skills.	The National Policy on Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (2015) outlines the need for large-scale skill development initiatives.
Support for the Unorganised Sector	Provide vocational training to the unorganised sector, which employs 93% of India's workforce.	The Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (2021) supports vocational training for informal workers to enhance productivity.
Increased Employability	Improve graduate employability by aligning skills with market needs.	NASSCOM and McKinsey (2005) emphasise addressing the employability gap in IT and BPO sectors.

7. Policy Recommendations for Skill-Oriented Education

India's education system must undergo substantial reforms to address the growing mismatch between educational output and labour market demands. For instance, a 2021 McKinsey report states that 60% of Indian employers seek skills such as data analytics, digital literacy, and problem-solving, yet these skills are rarely taught in schools (McKinsey & Company, 2021). This highlights the urgency of reorienting the curriculum towards skills that are immediately applicable in the modern job market.

Germany's dual education system, which integrates academic learning with practical experience, offers a successful model for India to emulate. This model not only enhances employability but also fosters a culture of continuous learning.

The 2022 OECD report highlights that countries with robust vocational training systems experience lower youth unemployment and greater economic resilience. Incorporating best practices from other countries can significantly enhance India's vocational education framework. For instance, South Korea's emphasis on technology education in the 1990s helped the country attract global tech giants like Samsung and Hyundai. By investing in vocational training that aligns with industry needs, South Korea successfully transitioned into a high-tech economy.

The introduction of industry-relevant certifications can further enhance the employability of graduates. By aligning vocational training with global standards, Indian graduates can gain recognition not only domestically but also internationally. Initiatives such as the National Skills Qualification Framework (NSQF), which aims to standardise skill training and assessment, are crucial for ensuring that Indian workers meet international labour standards.

Fostering a culture of entrepreneurship within the education system can empower students to create their own opportunities. Programs that encourage innovation, creativity, and business skills can help students transition from job seekers to job creators. This is essential for India to harness its demographic dividend effectively.

The policy recommendations for skill-oriented education in India must of necessity focus on integrating vocational training into the educational framework, adopting successful international models, and fostering a culture of entrepreneurship. By doing so, India can ensure that its workforce is prepared for the challenges and opportunities of a rapidly changing global economy.

8. Conclusion

India's transition into a knowledge-based economy requires an education system that fosters not only academic excellence but also practical, employable skills. Countries like Singapore and South Korea have demonstrated the long-term benefits of adopting skills-oriented education policies. For example, Singapore's focus on continuous upskilling and training throughout an individual's career has allowed its workforce to remain adaptable in a rapidly changing economy (Singapore Ministry of Education, 2022).

India must now invest in human capital by aligning its education system with the needs of the global economy. By doing so, it can harness its demographic dividend and transform its vast, young population into a powerful engine for socio-economic growth. Furthermore, addressing

The path ahead requires concerted efforts from policymakers, educators, and industry stakeholders to create an ecosystem that supports skill development and innovation. With the right investments in education and training, India can position itself as a leader in the global knowledge economy, ensuring a prosperous future for its citizens.

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