

High School Standards = High Growth

A PPP model will strengthen our weak education base to meet the high-quality job requirements of the future



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India is expected to be a major contributor to the world labour market in the coming years. However, as it has cautioned repeatedly that, given the gap between skill attainment through the traditional education system and employability, the fruits of demographic dividend are doubtful. This thought got little attention, but is based on perception than facts in terms of effectiveness and research capabilities of the IITs and the IIMs.

Before delving into the debate, it may be useful to analyse the scenario over the past decade seeing that the trend emerged from UGC enrolment data despite its shortcomings. Actual enrolments have doubled, rising from 6.65 million in 2000-01 to 13.64 million in 2008-09. The highest concentration of enrolments in the period is found in Arts followed by Science. It is important to point out that while the percentage of total enrolments has gone down in Arts, the absolute numbers have risen from 3.88 million in 2000-01 to 5.88 million in 2008-09.

Science is a broad category

and comprises four verticals whose combined share has actually risen over the last 13 years. Within Science, there has been highest growth in enrolments in engineering than natural sciences and medicine.

While the debate on education has often focused on quantity versus quality, it bears to be noted that even the quantity is not sufficient to ensure a smooth transition of labour from agriculture to manufacturing and services. The higher education system, in its present structure and content, is ill-suited to meet the desired skill requirements of the millions, particularly in the countryside. Additionally, institutions of higher learning of various streams are found concentrated in particular regions, implying that students have to migrate to other regions in order to pursue their studies. It puts an unbearable financial burden on families, preventing aspiring students from pursuing their further studies.

The other aspect of quality of education and training provided also needs to be thoroughly explored. Barring the top-league institutes — namely, the IITs, IIMs and a few other government-run colleges and universities — the quality of students does not quite match up. Corporates constantly complain of the complete skill mismatch between job requirement and qualification of applicants. In other words, though the app-

Arts Losing Its Strong Base

FIELD OF STUDY	% DISTRIBUTION (ENROLMENT)			CAGR (%)	
	UGC 1995-96	UGC 2000-01	UGC 2008-09	FY96 TO FY01	FY01 TO FY09
Science	28.7	31	32.8	6.5	6.9
Natural science	19	20	19.2	6	5.6
Engineering	6	7	9.6	8.1	10.5
Medicine	3	3.2	3.3	6.2	6.5
Agri/veterinary	0.9	0.8	0.8	3.1	4.9
Arts	47.8	46	43.1	4.1	5.3
Commerce	17	17.9	18.2	6	6.4
Others	6.5	5.2	5.9	0.5	7.8
TOTAL	100	100	100	4.9	6.2

licant pool may appear to be large, the number of qualified and eligible applicants is significantly smaller. This implies that although there are millions who graduate through privately-run colleges, they really don't stand a chance to compete in the global market place.

Let us for a moment forget about higher education and examine the education system at the school level — and the pathetic state it is in. Only 53% children in standard V in rural India can read a standard II-level text; the proportion of standard-I children who could recognise numbers 1-9 declined from 69% in 2009 to 66% in 2010; children in standard V who could do simple division problems also dropped from 38% in 2009 to 36% in 2010. This is the sorry state of affairs of India's school system. In addition, the drop-

out rate is extremely high. An NCAER study reveals the astonishing fact that 50% students drop out after class X. Secondly, the quality of teachers is abysmal. This, coupled with a high rate of teacher absenteeism and lack of incentives for students to stay in schools, ensures a very weak foundation.

If one analyses government schemes, what is revealed is a complete disregard of the problems in the middle and secondary levels. Given that most students get acquainted with streams such as science, commerce, etc, during these formative years and make their decisions based on their knowledge and understanding of the subject, it makes all the more sense for the system to be more efficient at these points. The problem — and this forms the crux of the issue — is that we need to first

make sure that the foundation is strong. We need to ensure that the system of education at the middle and secondary level is strengthened. It has to be a bottom-up approach rather than a top-down approach.

All this bears additional significance when viewed in the context of maintaining a high growth rate. Sustaining a high growth rate over the next few decades does not appear possible with a sizeable chunk of the labour force lacking basic educational qualification. At some point, the lack of a qualified labour force is going to start showing up in higher input costs that will affect growth.

Additionally, while China's gross enrolment ratio — the number of individuals in the 20-24 age group actually going to college — stands at 23%, the comparable figure for India is 13%. Granted, that per-capita income of the Chinese is significantly higher than India's, expecting the rate to increase as incomes rise without taking any steps is not advisable. A sustained high growth, the dream of many policymakers, will not be possible without a skilled and educated workforce. So, the need of the hour is that there is a strong need to revamp the education system in the light of future skill needs and better employability following a public-private partnership model. (The author is director of NCAER-CMCR)

1st AUG. 2011