

Make Graduates Employable

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The yin and the yang of Indian education and employment sectors present a fascinating study in contrasts. Speak to an educationist and you will be swept away on the rising tide of optimism generated by a groundswell of enrolment.

Talk to anyone in the private sector and you will get an earful about labour shortages. Labour market outcomes also present a similarly confusing picture. In the 1980s, a college graduate had over 70% probability of finding a white-collar job. This dropped to less than 50% in the last decade. However, shortage of qualified workers continues to drive up campus recruitment packages to dizzying heights.

How do we reconcile these contrasting pictures? The key to understanding this contrast lies in the word 'qualified'. The increase in our education levels has been accompanied by a decline in quality, creating a growing pool of unemployable college graduates.

The India Human Development Survey, conducted by

the National Council of Applied Economic Research and University of Maryland, provides a striking example. In this survey of over 41,000 households conducted in 2004-05, each cohort is more likely to finish college than the previous cohort. Among males born in 1930s, only 4% completed college. Among those born in 1970s, 13% completed college.

However, even on rudimentary skills such as ability to converse fluently in English, these new college graduates appear to fare more poorly than the college graduates of their fathers' generation.

Of male graduates born in the 1930s, 53% are fluent in English compared to only 31% among those who were born in the 1970s. This does not mean that the number of English speakers in India has gone down since rising education levels make up for some of the quality decline.

However, had these new graduates retained the same skill levels as those born in 1940s, India would have had 50% more English-speaking college graduates. Since English fluency brings enormous economic returns, and increases

wages by at least 12%, this increase in English speakers would have had enormous economic dividend.

We have few other markers of skills to compare across generations. If we were to give mathematics tests to adults, it is most likely that we would also see a decline in simple skills such as dividing fractions or solving basic algebraic equations.

What accounts for this decline? Part of the answer lies in the speed with which enrolments have risen. Rising demand for higher education can no longer be met with traditional colleges and a host of creative solutions ranging from private colleges to distance education are being embraced with little attention to quality. While students must meet some minimum standards to pass the examination, rote learning to prepare for the examination has become the norm.

But the other part of this answer is even more intractable. As enrolments rise and education is no longer the preserve of the elite, greater demands are placed on educators to teach students who are first-generation learners.

Many studies document that early childhood home environment with educated parents results in higher vocabulary and other academic skills that shape the child's future performance. When students from marginalised background enter the educational stream, the education system needs to recognise this added challenge and focus on replacing home inputs with school inputs. However, instead of rising to this challenge of rapidly democratising student body, schools and colleges have started outsourcing education.

Private tutoring is the norm even for young students. The India Human Development Survey found that 20% of children aged 6-14 years are securing private tutoring and perversely it is the more privileged children, those with educated background and living in metro cities, who take private tuitions rather than children from less-privileged backgrounds who may have the greatest need to make up for early education deficit.

This privatisation of school education has devastating consequences when we look at the composition of stu-

dents entering colleges. Renowned colleges of Delhi University now demand extremely high examination marks in board exams to admit students. This high-performance demand is met through extreme investment in coaching, beyond the reach of students from lower socio-economic strata. These students often flock to private educational institutions and distance education classes where they are unable to gain the skills that a traditional college imparts, thereby perpetuating a vicious cycle of low performance.

Can this skill deficit be remedied? Of course it can be, but first we need to recognise that we are facing a crisis.

Much of the policy discourse focuses on the need to expand educational opportunities with no attention to declining quality of skills we are imparting. Educational expansion and democratisation of education is a wonderful goal that is rendered meaningless if these new graduates are unemployable.

(The author is senior fellow at NCAER and professor of sociology at the University of Maryland. Views are personal)