

IS HIGHER EDUCATION OUT OF TOUCH WITH THE SKILL REQUIREMENTS IN THE JOB MARKET?

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Reports by private agencies state that fewer than half of India's graduates were employable in 2021. According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey, the unemployment rate among graduates is higher than in many other developing countries. Students who enrolled in college during the pandemic have now graduated and there are concerns over their employability and the quality of online education. Is higher education in India out of touch with the skill requirements in the job markets? **Furqan Qamar** and **Santosh Mehrotra** discuss the question in a conversation moderated by **A.M. Jigeesh**. Edited excerpts:

Has online learning impacted employability?

Santosh Mehrotra: There was a problem with employability well before this craze for online learning took off. It is important to understand that those who have acquired or are acquiring higher education are those who belong to at least the top 20-30% of the income distribution, so they are relatively well off; a vast majority of the country's youth don't even manage to enter higher education. Higher education enrolment rates are still about 27% (18-23-year-olds). In 2012, the unemployment rate among graduates was 20%; it shot up to 34% in 2021. Among postgraduates, it used to be 18% in 2012; it doubled to nearly 37%. Why am I saying this? Because even before the online boom, the problem with our education system was structural. A major reason for this was the massification of higher education between 2006 and 2018. Because of this, the number of private colleges grew and quality deteriorated. State governments, the Central government and the University Grants Commission did not have the capacity to regulate [them]. These universities just became exam-giving institutions. Online education is an additional problem, which perhaps Professor Qamar can speak about.

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Furqan Qamar: Yes, educated people are not getting jobs and therefore unemployment is an issue. But if graduates are not getting jobs in India, that could also be because the economy is not creating any jobs. That is why we have so many graduates leaving the country in search of better opportunities abroad.

Online learning did cause learning losses. We meet students who say that they missed a lot [while studying from home] and that it was a challenge to concentrate for long hours on screen.

There were learning deficiencies and that has affected the abilities of these students to acquire knowledge and become more employable. Ed-tech companies are downsizing as students themselves realised that such companies wouldn't serve their purpose.

You said that the economy is not creating jobs. Agriculture is still the largest employment-providing sector and the share of the manufacturing sector in providing jobs is coming down. So, how can skill enhancement in institutions of higher education bring changes in primary sectors?

Furqan Qamar: Agriculture in India remains largely conventional. It has not become high tech, so I don't see mainstream graduates joining agricultural professions. Even in the services sector, the jobs that are being created require a high level of knowledge. But most jobs, such as of delivery boys, are not preferred jobs for educated people although in the absence of jobs, they might be found in these jobs.

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Higher education institutions are essentially knowledge institutions. When they create new knowledge, it leads to the development of new technologies, the possibilities of new businesses, innovation, entrepreneurship, and start-ups.

Santosh Mehrotra: There are structural problems with the higher education sector. One, our research and development (R&D) expenditure as a proportion of GDP is only 0.7%. In Korea, it is 4%. So, how will new knowledge get created? Second, globally, the private corporate sector accounts for about 70% of total R&D expenditure; only 30% comes from the government. In India, the public sector accounts for some 70% of the total R&D expenditure and the private sector's contribution is relatively small. Private sector jobs in research are not growing. Third, unlike in the rest of the world, where most research takes place in universities, a very small proportion of public funding goes towards research within universities. Most of it from government sources goes towards the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, Indian Council of Medical Research, etc. This is problematic because these public research institutions don't have the mechanism of translating their research output into actual usable products and processes which can help ordinary people. The only way we are going to solve this problem is by creating institutions that convert patents or research scientific research papers into products and processes. Or universities have to be funded more and industry will have to be associated with this. Finally, unfortunately, our country still doesn't have an industrial policy or a manufacturing strategy. Young, educated researchers are absorbed in high-value services. There are 800 multinationals which have set up their global hubs for research here. But the value of that research flows abroad.

Professor Mehrotra, some reports suggest that India has a higher percentage of employable women graduates than men. But participation of women in the workforce is very low. Does it have anything to do with skill enhancement and opportunities for education for women in India?

Santosh Mehrotra: Indeed, it does. India's female labour force participation is among the lowest in the world. It's as low as in Yemen and Saudi Arabia. But let's remember that girls are getting better educated than before. India managed to rapidly ensure gender parity at the secondary level, which is unusual for its level of per capita income. So, more and more women became better educated and their aspirations are not to get married immediately. But what are they going to do if jobs are not growing?

This is the fourth year of the 2020 National Education Policy, which promised integration of skills with traditional syllabi and curricula. How do you assess the impact of NEP in fulfilling these requirements?

Furqan Qamar: The selective implementation of the policy is a problem. Whatever is happening is happening in the name of the policy, while the policy may be providing different things. As a result, we have not seen any substantive change in the education system on the ground. Instead, it has led to controversies and confusion about what higher education institutions should do.

Let me give an example. The policy clearly said that there should be a common basis for admitting students. It also mentioned that the National Testing Agency would hopefully have these systems and processes and that people may want to use those scores as a basis for selecting students. But then the policy underscored that the decision whether to use those scores or not would be left solely to individual higher education research institutions. That is a very good articulation as far as the autonomy of higher education is concerned. But then what we saw was that the Central University Entrance Test was introduced. Then we started talking about 'one nation, one examination'. So the higher education system is quite confused.

This takes me back to an earlier question on women. In engineering or in job-oriented courses, women are in lower numbers than boys, but on the whole, on average, there are more women. But let's talk of the larger issue of social growth equity. Are Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Muslims participating more in higher education? They are now almost close to as much as reservation provides, but they are still far lower as compared to their share in the population in the country. The policy doesn't talk about specific equity actions. The intervention strategies for promoting inclusiveness and equities for different sets of people need to differ.

India's industrial training institutes (ITI) and Polytechnic colleges were helping the poor and marginalised students to learn some skills. How are they placed to address this issue of inequality in skilled employability?

Santosh Mehrotra: ITIs have grown in number as affiliated colleges have grown in number at a phenomenal rate. When you get this level of massification, the issue of quality arises. This brings me back to the NEP which exhorts the country to go from the current level of 27% of gross enrolment ratio in higher education to 50% in a matter of another 12 years. This is a bizarre goal and the government has not increased allocations as to achieve this. I have an alternative: divert students at the end of Class 10 and Class 12 away from higher education towards ITIs and better vocational training institutions. And improve quality by engaging with industry and employers.

Furqan Qamar is Professor, Department Of Management Studies, at Jamia Millia Islamia; Santosh Mehrotra is Professor in Jawaharlal Nehru University

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