

Skill-driven futures

Creating employment-first education pathways: A vision for youth

KULDIP SARMA

India is a young country and more than 65% of its population is under the age of 35. That's a powerful advantage, but only if it is harnessed properly. For that to happen, education must lead to employment. Today, that connection isn't always clear. Many young people complete their education only to find that they're not prepared for the jobs they want or worse, the jobs don't exist where they are.

To unlock the full potential of India's youth, the country needs to build education systems that put employment at the centre starting from the ground up, not the top down.

What's missing, the skills gap

India's workforce has seen more young people enter higher education than ever before. But at the same time, employers across sectors say they struggle to find candidates with the right skills. And this isn't just about advanced technical knowledge, it's also about practical abilities, communication, problem-solving, and adaptability.

In rural areas, the gap is even wider. Nearly 80% of rural youth have never received any formal vocational training. That means a large section of our population is being left out of the country's economic growth story. The reality is, traditional education which is focused heavily on theory and exams, often doesn't prepare young people for real-world work environments. This disconnect needs to change.

New tools for change: NEP 2020 and NCrF

Fortunately, the country is beginning to move in the right direction. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 brings in a fresh perspective. It pushes for more holistic, flexible education, and places real emphasis on skills and vocational training. The goal is that by 2025, at least half of all students will have some kind of hands-on, work-related learning.

The National Credit Framework (NCrF) complements this beautifully. It allows students to earn credits not just through traditional classroom learning, but also through on-the-job experience, short-term courses, and even informal training through experiential learning. It creates a more flexible learning environment where students can pause, switch paths, and build their education around their lives and careers—not the other



way around. Together, NEP and NCrF are helping redefine what success looks like in education. This is not just in terms of degrees, but also in terms of employability and holistic development.

The UGC's Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) guidelines offers a massive opportunity to formalize skills in India's unorganized sectors for creating employment backed education pathways.

For individuals working for years without formal degrees/ certification be it in the beauty and wellness, construction, logistics, or manufacturing industry, RPL creates a pathway to validate one's expertise through practical assessments, bridge courses and documented work experience. This structured approach not only enhances their employability but also contributes to building a skilled and recognized workforce.

Another gamechanger to strengthen India's education ecosystem is the integration of the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC) in the curricula, which will allow students to accumulate and transfer credits seamlessly, providing flexibility in their learning journey.

Working together: Industry and education

None of this works unless industry is brought into the conversation. Employers shouldn't just be passive recipients of talent but need to be active partners in shaping it.

That means co-designing curriculum, offering internships or apprenticeships, mentoring students, and helping institutions understand where the world of work is heading.

When students get to learn by doing, by working on real-world problems, using real tools, with real accountability, they gain a different kind of confidence. That is the kind of learning that sticks.

There is a need for more structured, long-term partnerships between educational institutions and industries. This isn't just a luxury but is essential for making education meaningful and employment-ready.

Reaching Rural Youth: Inclusion starts from the ground up

The economic survey 2022-23 suggests that around 68% of India's youth lives in villages and small towns. But most of the employ-

ment-linked education is still centred around big cities. This needs to change.

Catch them young

If employment-first education pathways have to be built, the efforts have to begin early. Every child has something unique to offer, but the chance to spot it in time is often missed. Which is why it's crucial to prepare teachers to identify talent and potential, rather than test scores. By assisting kids in finding what they're best at and what they love, teachers can teach to their strengths and passions. This makes learning more relevant, and prepares the students for a career they'll not only enjoy, but excel at. This involves reconsidering what we teach, how we teach, and who we teach.

The future is flexible: Lifelong learning is the new normal

In this rapidly changing world, learning doesn't have to stop at college. Careers are changing, industries are changing, and technologies are upending what we used to think were stable career paths.

That's why modular, flexible, and ongoing education is key. The NCrF makes it possible for people to build their skills over time, adding micro-credentials or short-term courses as needed. This shift towards lifelong learning helps people stay relevant, resilient, and employable throughout their careers. It has to be made easier and more normal for people to keep learning at every stage of life, whether they're starting out, changing paths, or just looking to grow.

Although policy frameworks and tools like NEP 2020 and NCrF already exist, real impact will come when these provisions are put into practice, in every village, every college, and every workplace. It will take collaboration between educators, industry leaders, policymakers, communities and all the stakeholders.

But the result, millions of young Indians who are skilled, confident, and ready to contribute will be worth it.

This is not just about jobs. It's about dignity, purpose, and building a nation where every young person has a real shot at success.