

TVET: What's in a name? Thoughts on Vocational Education

Given the challenges TVET (Technical, Vocational Education and Training) is facing across countries there has been a very high degree of focus around it in both developing and developed contexts. There is a direct correlation being drawn to the importance of TVET and employability. The jobs and employment agenda has been on the forefront even more so since the financial crisis broke out more than six years ago, and that it impacts not only growth within the economy but it is also where agendas of the individual, the private sector and the public sector coincides at least in basic principle.

While we will look at issues that surround this in greater detail over a period of time and highlight different perspectives and practices, we will also aim to uncover insight that may have become obscure within the myriad views and accompanying cacophonies that crowd this space.

At the outset what I would like to focus on is the very terminology that is often questioned for its meaning and effect, Vocational Education. It is often the contention of experts that vocational education is not appealing and often has a poor image and low social perception, which results in poor uptake and lack of prioritisation amongst stakeholders. It was a key point I remember from the times we tried to highlight this to white collar policy makers, educationists and industrialists; we asked them that whom would they rather see their daughter marry, a corporate sales executive or a plumber? Followed by 'would they be happy seeing their daughter marry a plumber'? No points for guessing what their answer was, even though in some countries the plumber might make more money than the sales executive and a lot of other professions. Also to bear in mind that if the definition of vocational education is career related trade skills, incumbents of both occupations have perhaps partaken therein. So maybe we need to consider whether it is the profession itself or the strata of society that traditionally worked such jobs that lend itself to low social perception. Perhaps the deeper issue revolves around dignity of labour.

A lot of people suggest that we should perhaps use a different term instead of TVET to give it more respectability and get rid of legacy effects of the terms. I ofcourse think this has to be more strategic than merely playing around with terminology. I think the very chasm between general education and vocational education will need to be bridged for people to realise that both are integral to each other and our objective is holistic education. The failings of general education to be relevant, effective and practical have caused the emergence of this distinction. While some may see TVET as specialised focus on trade related skills, my contention is that language, mathematics, ICT, economics, perspective, etc. are all integral to careers, vocational education and skills attainment.

In some places TVET is under the garb of Further education, it is ingenious how we use that to differentiate it from higher education! So what is the aim of higher education? Even if it is to lead into teaching and research isn't that vocational (for occupational purposes), for if it is not then it is not practical and therefore not usable.

Just because we choose to draw a distinction and it serves experts in these areas to keep it so, doesn't mean it needs to be seen as a separate part while deploying it through the educational system. If the only part we plan to call TVET or its substitutes are trade specific skills the that should be seen as specialisations and should be again broken down into grade relevant skills with core mandatory requirements and electives. Higher level skills should be integrated with higher education frameworks. These are generally achieved through qualification frameworks and their linkages to existing general education and higher education systems. There is just no reason for these to be separate at all. I think in time the education system has to integrate and rise above the vested interests of experts who want these to be seen differently.

We just have started to see vocational education as an alternative because our general education system is failing, for vocational education to succeed we have to make the existing general education system effective as well. This is because the very foundational skills required for successful careers to be built upon are intended outcomes of the general education stream. We need to constantly review our education systems and be willing to do that in its entire construct too rather than merely piecemeal.

At the moment India is going down the path of attempting to define vocational education frameworks and not one but two, lead by two different government ministries. This is exactly the way vested interests driven agendas play out and what we need to be wary of. Turf issues are not going to help resolve this educational dilemma. In a country where the educational system is falling severely short of credibility and effectiveness, there is no reason to expect greater success in the creation of a parallel system that will perhaps take more effort, expertise and control than even fixing the current system of education. So on what do the apologists of this supposedly new (re-framed) class of education predicate the success of this system; I'd be very interested in knowing.

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