

6th FICCI GLOBAL SKILLS SUMMIT (2013) – Opinions, Observations and Comments

PART I

I am, as part of this series, going to write about key highlights of the 6th FICCI (Federation of Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry) Global Skills Summit concluded in Delhi on 6th September 2013. I hoping to share my own views and reflections, in relation to the ideas shared and presented as part of this summit.

I have been associated with the Vocational Education and Skills Development space for over a decade and have seen this space evolve in the Indian context across its various dimensions. Over the years I have been involved in various aspects of it as a student, practitioner, consultant, etc. I have been part of national and international interventions and organisations from where I have gained understanding and perspectives, working in micro and macro contexts with related aims and objectives. I find such events quite useful from the perspective of not only catching up with happenings and people in the sector, but also as it gives me time and opportunity to reflect in a very focused manner on the subject. I hope you will read this and find matters to reflect upon and hopefully get some insight which will be of use.

Call for setting up 'Centres of Excellence' with international assistance

The theme of the Skills Summit was 'Industry Leads' and the featured International Partner was the country of New Zealand. The summit inauguration was presided upon by the Minister of HRD Dr. Pallam Raju and the High Commissioner Jan Henderson. As part of the opening session a suggestion by the CEO and MD, Larsen & Toubro Ltd. Mr. K. Venkataraman was to set up Centres of Excellence with the help of international partners. Mr. Venkataraman who paid homage to the founders of L&T and the global standards which were laid within the foundations of the company, was clearly convinced with the need to bring learning and skills development to the centre stage of institutional endeavours.

The request for Internationally collaborated Centres of Excellence for me while was a gesture in the spirit of openness and partnership which acknowledges the progress made in the developed world, it is also a resigned view of the lack of ability of citizens, organisations and government of this country to create something benchmarked of global excellence. If it is indeed true then it is sad that despite the accelerated development and multi-national companies within this country we still cannot find a way to create and sustain Centres of Excellence that can be benchmarked to international standards. The reality of the matter is that despite having depth of talent, the passion and capability to deliver excellence we are unable to provide opportunities and conditions conducive to the manifestation of it.

Industry Leadership Buy-In

The CEO4Skills forum, an initiative to help prioritise skills development within the leadership of organisations. One of the key reasons why the representation of CEOs even in this forum seemed scarce, was the reason stated by Commodore. Jena, CEO telecom Sector Skills Council. He said, CEOs care for profits and the myriad seemingly more important tasks related to business issues which keep them busy. Thereby relegating the skills development agenda to much lower down in the list of priorities. Infact there was a question asked of whether entrepreneurs who set-up businesses and are at the helm of those in positions of so called leadership, are they truly leaders? Yes, they manage

products, processes and pursue their own visions, but true leadership remains by definition a concept that relies on impacting and leading other fellow humans. The perspective and capabilities of organisation heads needs to be expanded to bring this elemental view of leadership to the centre of their work practice and related beliefs.

Dinesh Deo, CEO BNY (Bank of New York) Mellon though highlighted the fact that their phenomenal growth in India which now finds them employing 4500 workers has been in large measure possible due to their focus on skills and talent development In-house. Especially given their niche requirements and business model. Ashish Kulkarni, CEO Reliance BIG Animation Pvt. Ltd and Ajay Shankar, Member Secretary, National Manufacturing Competitiveness Council both in their own ways acknowledged the fact that the Skills and Talent inherent in our country has been in large measure lost due to lack of respect and understanding of its importance. In some ways we are coming back a full circle and suffering as a result of not providing people the dignity of labour. The example of computer animation as a skill eventually finding take-up and success when it landed at the doors of the next generation of artisans, rather than in Engineering Colleges where the programmes were first instituted, was very relevant with a view to pointing out how we failed to take skills development up its logical natural progression and undermined the legacy that was the critical foundation for progress in this area.

6th FICCI GLOBAL SKILLS SUMMIT (2013) – Opinions, Observations and Comments - PART II

Continuing from part I of this series, this section deals with the challenges in the Vocational education and training sector in India. It also draws comparisons with differences in the Indian and global contexts at a time when more and more international stakeholders are entering the Indian market and their domestic counterparts and other stakeholders look westward to replicate the seemingly successful international model. India over the years have shown fascination and inclination towards countries such as the UK, Germany, Australia, S. Korea, Switzerland, USA, Canada, New Zealand, etc.

Motion or progress

At the 6th FICCI Global Skills Summit, many presented and deliberated on the opportunities and challenges in skills development and vocational education in the Indian Context. It was really disheartening to see that the same challenges and elicitations were being repeated that were relevant 10 years ago, only with more exasperation, especially with regard to the following points

1. Lack of aspiration in relation to vocational careers
2. Lack of qualified teachers, trainers and assessors
3. Poor wages at entry level positions that deter young people to accept employment
4. The predominance of the unorganised sector (over 90%) in employment terms
5. The lack of a robust model to deliver skills development initiatives in this unorganised sector
6. The poor basic key skills and generic work skills amongst the larger population that undermines efforts for employment and formal training
7. Lack of focus on defining progressive career paths and ongoing support for learning and development to move along those paths with embedded choice and free volition

While there has been great amount of activity in creating new structures and announcement of schemes over the last few years, there was palpable despondency amongst most Indian practitioners especially those who had taken on accountability for results and change. There was hardly any success that was visible as a result of these efforts. In fact there was clear frustration from the end of last mile delivery stakeholders who were worried about the multiplicity of schemes with no accountability for credible and meaningful certification and jobs for the intended beneficiaries. One of the speakers, actually highlighted the fact that it was the ambition of the government to skill 500 mn beneficiaries by 2022, whereas in the past 5 years we have not been able to cross even 2 mn.

It was also amusing to hear of the ongoing emergence of qualification frameworks, which involved the NVEQF (national vocational education qualification framework) by the MHRD, NVQF (National Vocational Qualification Framework) by MoLE (Ministry of Labour and Employment) and is now being called the NSQF (National Skills Qualification Framework) by the NSDA (National Skills Development Authority). The NSDA subsumed what was earlier Prime Minister's National Council on Skill Development (PMNCSD) and the National Skill Development Coordination Board (NSDCB).

Comparisons with the Global Scenario

It was really interesting to hear all the visiting professionals from down-under who spoke mostly of conditions prevailing in their respective countries, but the difference in contexts made it quite clear that we are operating in a much more complex environment with many challenges and variables that the developed countries don't usually have to deal with.

The key differences in context are

1. Most vocational education in almost all developed countries is funded by the government.
2. Most vocational education is aimed at candidates who have completed schooling and have education attainment levels beyond that in India. The quality of basic and key skills as a result of that education is significantly higher than that of the average Indian counterpart.
3. Most developed countries have some form of social security, housing and healthcare that takes care of basic needs of their citizenship.
4. Most developed countries don't have to cope with the distances and diversity that exists within the vastness of India
5. Unlike in India there is greater industry presence and employment opportunities spread across most parts of their country, therefore migration and the need to travel/relocate isn't as big an issue.

Other differences which prevail and can provide good insight are

1. Industry – academia interface in the space of vocational education is very well developed and contributes significantly to enhance quality of education. Most countries use the dual approach where the practical work is carried out within Industry in real workplace conditions and the Polytechnic/college provides theoretical inputs in classrooms. This is especially useful as a number of machines and equipment that is very expensive, is not affordable for a number of vocational education and training institutes, whereas these are available and being used by Industry. Students are paid stipends for the work that they deliver as part of their training which contributes to the employer's operation and output.
2. Vocational teachers and trainers have good amount of Industry experience and are valued for it. At the same time to qualify as a teacher/trainer one is tested rigorously and has to measure up to high standards set.
3. Vocational training institutions are involved in producing and delivering goods and services to clients or the market place and students are involved in the same. The quality of output is therefore market tested and students get an opportunity to develop real work skills.

6th FICCI GLOBAL SKILLS SUMMIT (2013) – Opinions, Observations and Comments - PART III

The 6th FICCI Global Skills Summit, Delhi 2013 with the theme 'Industry Leads' aimed at showcasing the efforts and involvement of Indian Industry in changing the paradigms of Vocational Education and Skills Development in the Country. As national and international stakeholders pin the hopes of economic and social development on access to progressive economic livelihood and employment opportunities, VET and Skills development is seen as the critical enabler for the same. In my previous two posts in the series Part I and Part II, I have discussed the macro picture; in this instalment I discuss the industry sectors' views about VET in India.

Industry and Sector Perspectives

The respective sector specific sessions were particularly interesting for various reasons. In the Tourism & Hospitality session, we heard representatives from Indian tourism sector who kept complaining about the lack of interest of job seekers in taking up jobs in their sector. It was interesting to hear the very same people acknowledge the very slow career progression that occurs within the industry. On one hand they kept complaining of training organisation never asking employers about what they seek in potential hires on the other hand they said that they saw potential business opportunities in training for their sector so they have set-up their own profit making training institutions. This obviously meant they were not interested in sharing the real industry needs with other competing training providers.

It was interesting though to see this new look sector seek people with language capabilities including French, German, Spanish etc. apart from English. In addition key skills sought were that of customer orientation, this is not the first time I have heard people refer to this as "something that people just have or don't", implying this is not something that can be learnt or developed or be seen as being possessed in varying degrees. This obviously shows how we visualise and scope our vocational education interventions to that of post school and limited to trade competences and not behavioural and cognitive competences. This is a view which has to expand to include these and to see the learning, skills and development platform to include formative formal and informal education.

The next sector on show was that of Food Processing, Mr. Siva Nagarajan, MD Mother Dairy Fruit and Vegetable Pvt. Ltd. expounded on the vast size of this sector and the growing opportunities therein. He explained how most interventions were happening in post-production phase and there was almost virgin opportunities in improving productivity earlier in the food production and processing value chain. An example was the hopelessly inadequate numbers of Veterinary research institutes and services providers across the country, which according to him translates in about 3000 points of service available for farmers who face problems with farm animals.

The third sector represented was the IT and ITeS sector, where Dr. Sandhya Chintala, Executive Director – IT & ITeS Skills Council, who represents NASSCOM spoke about the effort they have put in to identify and develop standards for 67 entry level positions in the sector. What quickly followed was the admission that it was up to employers in the sector to use the standards and seemingly things are not going well on that front. There was also recognition of the fact that the technology is evolving so rapidly that it is difficult to capture a static view of it in the standards.

The final sector on the platform was the Capital Goods sector. There was recognition that in the recent past this sector has not been as much in favour as the IT and Electronics segment and therefore was finding less success in attracting talent. The other important points highlighted was the value of developing talent across the value chain in the industry, including the various sized organisations

(Small, Medium and Large) supply chain partners and sub-contractors, etc. There was also recognition that the real challenge facing the industry was from the import market, which clearly highlights the need for higher quality at affordable prices in Indian Industry necessitating engineering innovation and reliability.

Getting the priorities right

During one of the sector specific sessions I was particularly distressed by the way potential hires coming from the backward “B and C grade towns” were referred to by the speaker. It almost castigated the lot for their lack of skills and education. I could almost have no sympathy for members of industry who won’t have the basic respect for their workers. I would like to take time to discuss this here, as I see this as the most important underlying in the whole scheme of things.

It was amply evident on so many occasions, the difference in attitudes that prevailed between the visiting countries and perhaps our own. While the Kiwis were talking about caring for their students, their lives and well-being, including the Indian minister’s recollection of how during his recent visit to New Zealand each formal meeting began with thanking of the people of the land and their ancestors, what was the centre of attention for most of our speakers were the lack of education, skills and ability of our people, including students, teachers, etc. People were more concerned about business opportunities, profit and loss, throughput and everything else but about the poor non-visible intended beneficiaries. This came to highlight in another case when a member of the audience was stating the grievance about how the recently launched STAR scheme was the third vocationally oriented scheme over the past three years and this comes at a time when the intended beneficiaries of the previous two schemes are languishing without jobs and meaningless non-recognised certification. The way these grievances were brushed aside as unimportant in the big scheme of things, it was evident that no one was really concerned about the fate and circumstances of the beneficiaries but merely for facile recognition of their pseudo-intellectual discourses and their own pecuniary agendas.

I am a firm believer that once the people in this country begin to do two things, the very face of this country will change. The world will follow us then. The first of these two things is care for others. The day we begin to think for the well-being of others as individuals we will truly commence our journey on the road to progress. The second thing is learning, the day we recognise the extent of our ignorance and adopt the disposition of seeking learning, going deeper and wider in the search for it we will truly be marching further along that very road of progress.

During the Food processing session, while businessmen were expounding about business opportunities, jobs and interventions to increase productivity, Donovan Wearing, CEO Taratahi Agricultural Training Centre, New Zealand made a succinct point emphatically, we need to be worried about quality in Food Processing for the simple reason that, “it’s the food we all eat”.

6th FICCI GLOBAL SKILLS SUMMIT (2013) – Opinions, Observations and Comments - PART IV (Concluding part)

Day 2 of the 6th FICCI Global Skills Summit, saw a number of important sessions, but given the lack of a number of so called 'important people' the audiences had dwindled down of course. In the concluding part of this series we will look at some of the capacity issues and specific integral challenges in the area of TVET and Skills development. Part I, Part II and Part III of this series focused on the macro end and at industry perspectives, this concluding part focuses from the perspective of providers and audiences.

Capacity and Delivery challenges

The first session on Day 2 was on the strategy to tap the best human resource as assessors, trainers and content writers, those who enable the ecosystem for skills development to deliver. Paul Comyn, Senior Vocational Training and Skills Development Specialist, ILO was of the view that we are announcing schemes and mechanisms for skills development which rely on large scale human resource expertise already in place for implementation of the schemes, thereby undermining the schemes and their implementation. This clearly implies that we are not acknowledging the true environmental local conditions that are critical to factor for any hope for success, instead relying on models and rhetoric that is either inspired by those swaying to pseudo-intellectuals, foreign agendas and opportunism, International and local private sector profiteers, or political opportunists and those driven by and practicing populist politics. Jo (Jyotsna) Aggarwal, Senior Advisor Employability to Silatech an initiative in the middle-eastern countries spoke of how technology interventions are making it possible to reach learners and training providers on a large scale and across far reaches. Silatech is providing them learning and teaching resources in self-access mode through the use of technology post the Arab-spring revolutions that made traditional models of reaching them through the government system non-viable. It did not convince me as to the power of technology as much as it made me even more convinced that we operate in an unstable and fast changing environment where people and communities need to find methods that allow for self-sustained and localised ways to keep the wheels of social and economic progress rolling.

Ninad Vengurlekar, Vice President IL&FS Ltd. made very pertinent comments on the challenges for practitioners on ground, as they have to face with not only the regional diversity but also with lack of basic key skills, values and attitudes. The examples of intended beneficiaries not interested in learning, undisciplined to the extent that they are rude, temperamental and not punctual, necessitating providers to focus on things such as anger management as a component of vocational education. For me this was one of the highlights of the Skills Summit, the realisation this should bring is that education, whether vocational, general or informal, has to first acknowledge the holistic dimensions of development. While a number of people pin their hopes on vocational education, raising minimum wages, primary education, teacher training and other developmental interventions, are the pivots on which the developmental progress hinges, the reality is that for any chance of success there has to be a recognition of the fact that unless we address human development from a perspective of wholeness we will only be going around in circles and falling hopelessly short of any meaningful achievement.

The session on 'Skills in Schools–Making skills development aspirational', highlighted the work extending into schools, especially the open school. The NIOS has taken up the agenda to vocationally train 5000 open school students as a pilot project. People have always questioned how do we develop practical skills that require practical training through the open school system? Well, Dr. S.S. Jena, Chairman, National Institute of Open Schooling has decided to take that challenge. I keenly await to see

that model work, which I assume will use technology and industrial touch points for practical sessions. Ofcourse what was also highlighted again was the Industry- academia cooperation required to make it a success.

Beneficiary segments requiring special focus

The last session before the close of the two days of presentations was focused on audiences, especially those that required special focus. This comprised three back to back sessions on Women, Persons with Disability and those that represent workers of the Unorganised Sector. Rashmi Singh, Executive Director, National Mission for Empowerment of Women almost tripped herself as she rhetorically questioned and attempted to answer the question as to why the category of 'women' was clubbed with persons of disability and those in the unorganised sector. While she arrived at the common underlying of vulnerability especially in the prevailing context as the reason, Prakash Tewari, VP CSR & Education, Jindal Steel spoke of the various initiatives Jindal Group has taken to involve women in training and employment programmes.

Shane Anderson, Director TR7 Training Services, Perth, Australia elucidated upon the international opportunities available within the Global Skilled workers job market, especially nursing which traditionally has been dominated by women. The facts have been highlighted time and again, of the surplus manpower that India will have in the future (estimated to the tune of 56 mn workers) in the face of an aging developed world with deficient skilled manpower (estimated to the tune of 47 mn) – Figures from BCG study for PHD Chambers of Commerce. Shane spoke of a nursing project in India that will focus on training nurses who earn upto 400000 AUD and supplying them to Australia and other parts of the world.

While talking of skills, training and employment needs of those with disability there was a collective request going out to industry to make work places accommodative for those with special needs. Ms. Shanti Raghavan, Founder Enable India placing the blame squarely at society not having enough expectations from those with special abilities, right from their homes, schools to their place of work. Having expectations allows us to provide opportunities for work and encourages them to deliver in line with those expectations. This helps them in finding ways that circumvent their limitations and as a result develops skills and confidence amongst them.

The final group was discussing models for skills development in the unorganised sector. While there was consensus on two things across the group, firstly the vast size of the sector and its contribution to the GDP and employment that made it really important to address the skills needs there in. Secondly, the real practical difficulties in delivering skills to this sector including engagement of targeted beneficiaries, aspiration levels and time off from daily wage based work. The three things that offered a way forward were,

- a) to address skills needs through up-skilling existing workforce in the sector
- b) to find innovative models of funding that allowed people to take time off work and afford training interventions and finally
- c) to ensure that training infrastructure is available locally and close to the their actual place of work or residence that overcomes the logistical challenges involved.

Conclusion

The final day of the Summit was reserved for one on one B2B meetings between New Zealand and Australian Vocational Training providers and interested Indian counterparts and other related institutions. There was quite a good response to the same which was encouraging for both sides.

As I reflect over the whole event and its content, I think while such opportunities aim at bringing interested parties together and serve as networking points, for someone who has seen such events for the last 10 years, each time reflecting on the content, endeavours, progress and milestones, I am quite disheartened by the lack of results in the face of expectations, given the focus and time spent on this critical agenda. I am even more disheartened by the lack of understanding, substance and insight that is as evident as the profusion of apathy and desperate need for earnest and well thought out interventions.

We continue to grow in size and complexity, yet we are as far away from real solutions as we ever were. But the hope lies in the small but hardy endeavours of people who are earnest in the care for those who surround them, committing to create opportunities, pathways of learning and improved performance, instilling the values that will serve individuals and society to achieve progress. Unfortunately when you see the head table they seem the least visible and outnumbered by the large companies who often pay to get these positions and those in power. I, over the last decade, am still waiting to see those out there who truly care and are committed to finding the right solutions for the right reasons, with the willingness to learn and roll up their sleeves putting their shoulder to the wheel for an earnest try.

Maybe I expect too much, but then didn't someone already say that lower expectations always leads to dis-empowering and sub-optimal results.

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