



Balancing Skill Education and General Education: A Study on Additional Skill Acquisition Programme of Kerala

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ABSTRACT: Skill development is a highly discussed subject in India in recent times. The government emphasises the skill development of youth, women, unemployed, persons with disabilities (PWDs) and workforce at large a priority. The skill development and educational policy of the government call for blending general education with vocational education and skill development. This research study seeks to understand the implications of the Additional Skill Acquisition Programme (ASAP), a scheme offered to higher secondary students of the Kerala, which runs simultaneously to the general academic curriculum. This study focuses on the impact of ASAP training on the general education of the enrolled students. The study found that the beneficiary students of ASAP training did not have any major negative impact on their general education due to the simultaneous skill education training received through ASAP. The English communication classes, as part of skill training, is also said to have helped them in their general education.

Keywords: Skill development, skill education, vocational education and training, general education, Additional Skill Acquisition Programme (ASAP), skill development policy, demographic dividend, educated unemployment, demographic transition.

1. INTRODUCTION

India is passing through a period of demographic transition from a country with high birth and death rates to one with low birth and death rates. This transitional stage poses a huge challenge as well as an opportunity for the developing economy. This transition is characterized by the phenomenon fondly called as "demographic dividend" where the working age population, that is, people belonging to the age group of 15-59 years, constitute the majority of the population. Currently, around 62 percent of India's population belong to this working age group. The demographic dividend is estimated to last until the year 2040 (Chenoy, 2014). It is estimated that the average age of an Indian will be just 29 in the year 2020. The labour force will be 32 percent of the population. But India has only less than five percent of its workforce formally skilled (Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, Government of India, 2018). It is widely believed that skill development plays a significant role in confronting the numerous challenges faced by a developing country. The government has turned its attention towards this remarkable phenomenon and skill development attracts unprecedented attention nowadays.

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The Union Budget 2017-18 proposed establishing 100 International Skill Centres across the country. It also envisaged launching of SANKALP (Skill Acquisition and Knowledge Awareness for Livelihood Promotion Programme) to provide market relevant training for 3.5 crore youth. There are around 70 skill development schemes under different ministries in India. The budget also allocated funds for the extension of PMKVY (Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikash Yojana) to 600 districts (Thomas, 2017). Skill India mission was launched on 15 July 2015 to boost the skill development initiatives taken up by the government. It targets the skill development of 400 million people within the age group of 15-45 by 2022 (Chenoy, 2014).

Skill development takes place at different levels such as vocational education and training imparted through ITIs (Industrial Training Institutes) and polytechnics, as standalone schemes and programmes such as PMKVY, DDU-GKY (Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushal Vikas Yojana) and as a part of the curriculum in general education in secondary schools. There are nearly 12000 Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) offering pre-employment training. There are also Vocational Higher Secondary Schools (VHSSs) which absorb 5 percent of the students in the higher secondary stream. There are also vocational skill providers affiliated to National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) offering skill courses. Some schools in a secondary stage have even started offering skill courses along with general education (Mehrotra, 2014).

Policy Framework on Skill Development

Integration of vocational education with general education had been a matter of discussion in post-independent India. Kothari Commission (1964-66) called for vocational education to be given along general education in schools. The National Policy of Education (1986) started the vocationalisation of education. But the vocational education imparted through Vocational Higher Secondary Schools, Polytechnics and Technical schools attracts less youth towards it. National Policy on Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (NPSDE), 2015 and National Skill Development Policy (NSDP), 2009 envisage the integration of general education and skill development. NSDP 2009 was the first policy document of the Government of India on skill development. NSDP looks at skill development as a means for employment generation, economic growth, and social development. Thus, skill development is given due focus on nation-building. NSDP 2009 aims at skilling of 500 million Indians by 2022. India is eyeing to capitalize this human resource surplus through skill development of its people and thereby achieving economic growth and inclusion. A new Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship was created in 2014 for coordinating and facilitating various skill development programmes run by the Government of India. The Ministry reviewed the NSDP, 2009 and came up with a new policy on skill development. The critical policy statements of NPSDE 2015 include integration of skill training with formal education in 25 percent of secondary schools (class 9-12) by 2022. The National Curriculum Framework, 2005 also proposes the inclusion of vocational training in general education. Few states have started vocational training courses along with regular education. India has just over 10,000 vocational higher secondary schools and around 1000 schools where vocational education is offered since class 9. Only about 5 percent of Indian students have vocationally trained annually. As an economy advances from agrarian to industrial structure, there will be corresponding changes in

the employment opportunities generated in that economy. A developing economy faces the challenge of skill shortage. New jobs requiring more advanced skills emerge, necessitating skill development and training of the workforce. This also demands change in the educational curriculum of a country (Institute of Applied Manpower Research, 2014).

Skills and Social Exclusion

Unemployment and related problems result in social exclusion, manifested through social withdrawal of the people from family and friendship circles, low social integration and cohesion, declining self-esteem, mental and physical health problems, poverty and low decision-making ability. Long-term unemployment has disastrous consequences among the people, and a subculture tends to develop among them. Lack of work skills and work experience are significant causes of high youth unemployment (Silver, Social exclusion and social solidarity: Three paradigms, 1994). Youth unemployment rate in India stands at 12.9 percent, and only 10 percent of the graduates completing university education are employable. A substantial portion of youth belongs to Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) category (Gianchandani, 2015). The above statistics reveal the enormous challenge faced by the Indian policymakers. Skill development and vocational education have been highlighted as a solution to this unique challenge.

ASAP and Context of Skill Development in Kerala

The overall employability in Kerala is below 25 percent even though it has a rich human resource pool. There are about 43 lakh registrants in Employment exchanges across the state. The unemployment rate in Kerala is 20.97 percent compared to 12.9 in India (Employment and Unemployment Situation in India, NSS 68th Round, 2011- 2012, 2014). About sixty percent of higher secondary and undergraduate pass outs remain unemployed in Kerala. "Educated unemployment" is a problem in Kerala. The graduates and other highly qualified people find it difficult to get employment. The skill sets possessed by graduates and the skills demanded by industry are too stark. The service sector alone provides for 60 percent of employment in Kerala. The mismatch between the skill sets demanded and supplied perpetuates the unemployment problem in the state (State Skill Development Report: Preliminary Project Report, 2012).

ASAP is a programme under the State Skill Development Project (SSDP) and was started in November 2012. ASAP is a collaborative effort of the Departments of General Education and Higher Education. The purpose of the programme is to develop employable skills among the higher secondary and college going students. The funding of the programme is shared by the government of Kerala and the Asian Development Bank (ADB), through a result-based lending framework. ASAP is now offered in 1052 institutions including colleges, higher secondary schools and vocational higher secondary schools across the state under 121 Skill Development Centres (SDCs). There are 83 skill courses offered by ASAP from 23 skill sectors (<http://asapkerala.gov.in/>, 2018). The government of Kerala order (GO no-546/2012/H.Edn) issued by the Department of Higher Education in 2012 provides for an incentivized fee structure for socially disadvantaged students belonging to SC, ST, OBC, PWD and BPL categories. The ASAP official website states that there were only about 1,10,000 students trained by it till the academic year 2016-17

(<http://asapkerala.gov.in/>, 2018). The socially disadvantaged students are a priority group for the scheme. The ASAP classes take place simultaneous to the general academic curriculum. The enrolled students of the scheme are generally required to attend skill classes during Saturdays, Sundays, vacations and one additional hour each day in working days. The main concern of the study is the impact of ASAP on the general education of the students. There is a possibility of a clash between the schedule of school programmes and that of ASAP. This seems to have a burdening impact on the general education of the students. The students may lose focus on their studies, and they may have to spend more time on the ASAP classes. This may result in declining academic performance of the students. This may have a long-term negative impact on the career aspirations of the students.

Objectives of the Study

The major objective of the study was to study how skill development and training influence the general education of the beneficiaries. In addition to that, the study also focused on finding out the motivation to join ASAP and access to training.

Methodology

The study uses a descriptive research design. The nature of the study is quantitative. The field work was done during April and May of 2018. There are about 90,000 students who have undergone ASAP training in Kerala from 2012 onwards during either their higher secondary schooling or graduation days (ASAP Annual Report-2016, 2017). The population of the study constitutes all higher secondary students who have undergone ASAP training in Ernakulam district in the academic years 2014-16 and 2015-17. There are 3,149 higher secondary students who had undergone ASAP training during these two years (ASAP Annual Report-2016, 2017). The sample of the study constitutes 60 students who had undergone ASAP training during the academic years 2014-16 and 2015-17 from 9 higher secondary schools which provided ASAP along with their general education. There were 54 higher secondary schools in the Ernakulam district which offered ASAP in 2015-16. The researcher randomly selected the nine schools from the list of 54 schools and again randomly picked 60 students from the nine schools which were already selected for the study. The research study used a self-prepared interview schedule for gathering primary data from the respondents. The researcher also made use of government statistics and official reports of ASAP as secondary data sources. The primary data was analyzed using simple statistical tools of frequency and percentage tables.

Results and Discussion

This study focused on understanding the influence of skill development and training in general education among the beneficiaries of the training program. In addition to that, the purpose of the study also included identifying the motivation of the beneficiaries to join a skill development program. Results of this study indicate that the beneficiaries see it as an additional course apart from their higher secondary education and most of the beneficiaries (45%) joined ASAP programme due to this fact. However, the twenty five percentage of the beneficiary students joined the programme hoping to get employment immediately after higher secondary education. Almost all the beneficiaries joined ASAP by individual agency. The skill course enrolment of

beneficiaries was mainly from courses offering skills in service sector and bouquet of skill courses offered by ASAP is also predominated by skill courses for the tertiary sector. Another fact that was noticed during the study was that the interest in the specific subject and employment opportunities were two critical factors which directed the beneficiaries in choosing a skill course.

Among the respondents of the study, a vast majority (93.3%) of the beneficiaries feel that ASAP course did not affect their higher secondary education in any way and the majority of the beneficiaries (61.7 %) claim that their English language skills improved due to ASAP training. On the other hand, the ASAP beneficiaries also had to face a lot of challenges as well, for instance, a significant number of beneficiaries (36.7%) reported that they had met occasional overlapping and clashes between ASAP programme and school programme. Some of the beneficiaries (10%) faced pressure and workload in balancing ASAP and regular classes. The external differentiation caused by ASAP training between the enrolled students and non-enrolled students in a classroom had minimal impact on the beneficiaries. The attitude of the teachers and other classmates were normal. Location of the skill development centre (SDC), the timing of the classes and transportation cost were the significant challenges faced by the beneficiaries while attending the skill classes.

Even when there were many opportunities and challenges for the participants, the effect of ASAP on the social life and leisure of the beneficiaries was minimal. The program was on overall benefited the participants in enriching their skills.

Conclusion

ASAP course is an innovative programme started in Kerala to raise the employability of the higher secondary and under-graduation students. The scheme is different in its mode of operation from the traditional way of vocational education. The students undergoing general education are offered vocational courses during their regular course by conducting skill classes on Saturdays, Sundays, vacation and holidays. The study sought to find whether the scheme had a deleterious effect on the general academic performance of the students. The beneficiary students are predominantly from socially disadvantaged groups, and they are offered skill training free of cost.

The beneficiaries feel that the skill training did not have a negative impact on their general education. The beneficiaries also claimed the positive impact of ASAP in their general education especially in improving their English language skills. The approach of beneficiaries towards the scheme was tactical since most of them joined ASAP to get acquainted with an area of interest rather than to enter the labour market right after the higher secondary education. The occasional clashes between the ASAP training schedule and regular school programme is a cause of concern. The scheduling of the skill classes should be arranged with minimum overlapping with the general education curriculum. The skill classes can be given on a continuous basis in vacations instead of Saturdays and Sundays thereby reducing the burden among the students and improving the quality of skill training delivery. Further studies should be encouraged to analyse the various dimensions of skill training among the beneficiary students.

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