

## Skill development: Better to prepare than repair

As I recently strolled through a shady, tree-lined walkway in one of Lucknow's colleges, many of the oft repeated critiques of government educational institutions came to view. For many, the sight may seem bleak: A dilapidated building in need of urgent repair, disinterested students who near graduation lack the skills they need to secure employment in the modern workplace and an educational institution not yet equipped with the analytical tools required to track its graduates' employment rates.

The same scene is depicted at most second- and third-tier general stream[1] colleges in India. A graduate degree from such institutions often fails to equip students with relevant skills and empower them to enter the employment market after graduation. In fact, most of those students have refrained from placing any job placement assistance expectations on the colleges. They seem to have resigned themselves to the fact they will fend for themselves in the job market.

It's a system in need of well-documented repair.

Though "*Skill Development*" has been a buzz word in most policy related discussions in India of late, skill training has been prioritized for a limited population of youth outside the formal education system. Today, most skill development courses cater to this audience while ignoring the necessary improvement of skill training within educational institutions. A recent study by Aspiring Minds reveals most of the general or engineering stream graduates in India are unemployable in today's job market.

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Ironically, investments required to *repair* the skill development and employability problems are better spent when helping students *prepare* for employment while they are within the formal education system.

A few ambitious entrepreneurs have launched innovative business models to provide quality skill training to this neglected segment. Medha, a Michael & Susan Dell Foundation grantee, is one such organization offering third-year college students on-campus, Career Boot camps. They provide skill training and then assist students with identifying job opportunities, preparing for interviews and negotiating salaries.

One student says the preparation is one of the best things to happen to him during his three years of college. "This is the only place where I feel that college is preparing me for my future life. All other classes only serve to push an outdated curriculum down our throat, whereas this session actually teaches us skills that are relevant in today's world."

Founded by Chris Turillo and Byomkesh Mishra in 2011, Medha aims to impart skill training to students from colleges in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, two of the least-developed states in India. The training takes a two-pronged approach: in-class training in areas such as business communication and teamwork, then internships impart industry-specific skill training to students. The organization has already assisted more than 1,000 students and looks to train 10,000 additional students over the next three years.

Given the overwhelming need for skill training, more entrepreneurs are required to enter the business of *preparing* students for employment. A preparatory college model has obvious advantages over the standard skill training models:

Lower cost, better sustainability – The training providers can use the college infrastructure and resources, thereby reducing both setup and operational costs.

Captive and engaged audience – Such models have significantly lower dropout rates;

Ambitious, engaged college students with proper training have the capacity to improve future employment outcomes.

More transformative engagement – In-college courses are longer than traditional training models, often spanning the entire three-year graduate course. Thus, it is possible to introduce more intensive and transformative interventions.

Repairing the low employment rates and skill development issues in India requires a multifaceted approach. Better preparing students for employment while they undergo graduation in college is one proven, effective approach that should be implemented by more colleges and universities.

[1] General stream colleges cater to Arts, Commerce and Science streams