



## Pathways to Progress: Career Guidance for Youth

Isha Gupta and Swati Goyal

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# Contents

<b>Scale of the problem</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>The Root of the Problem: Systemic Absence of Career Guidance</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>Evidence: Voices from the Field</b> .....	<b>4</b>
What Students Tell Us .....	5
What Educators Observe .....	6
What Employers Experience .....	7
<b>Career Guidance as an Important Part of the Solution</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>Current Landscape: Promising Foundations, Missing Coordination</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>The Path Forward: Building on Existing Foundations</b> .....	<b>10</b>
1. Implement Proven Interventions.....	10
2. Build Supportive Infrastructure.....	12
3. Institutionalise for Long-Term Impact .....	12
<b>Call to Action</b> .....	<b>13</b>



*"I don't know what I'm supposed to do after this,"* she said quietly. An Arts graduate, Laxmi's<sup>1</sup> uncertainty was not due to lack of ability but lack of guidance. Her parents wanted her to prepare for a government job, but she didn't know what other career pathways were even possible. A counselling session helped her discover opportunities in Hospitality. An unpaid internship at the Taj group turned into a full-time role within months. Laxmi's story is not unique—it highlights the persistent gap in information and career exposure that prevents many young people from making informed decisions about their futures.

This policy brief based on extensive primary research across government schools, Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs), and polytechnics, reveals a fundamental gap in the education and training ecosystem. That is, the absence of structured career guidance at critical junctures in the education to employment transition. Not only is there a lack of understanding on how to work towards making one's goals a reality, but there is also a mismatch between aspirations and the opportunities available to young people.

Our research revealed these gaps, and our fieldwork highlighted some effective models for addressing them. This brief discusses the critical importance of career guidance in reducing information gaps within education and training institutions. Drawing on field observations, it presents recommendations to help address these challenges and enable a smoother education to employment transition for India's youth.

## Scale of the problem

With over 371 million young people aged 15–29, India is home to the largest youth population in the world.<sup>2</sup> This demographic advantage should be driving unprecedented economic growth. Instead, the numbers paint a different picture. Approximately 32.9 percent of youth in India are not in education, employment, or training (NEET)—meaning that one in four youth are currently disengaged from productive activities, neither contributing to the economy nor building future capacity.<sup>3</sup> The youth labour force participation rate<sup>4</sup> remains low at 46.5 percent, with 63.5 percent for males and a significantly

## Approximately 32.9 percent of youth in India are not in education, employment, or training (NEET)

1 The authors have used a fictitious name to maintain the anonymity of the respondent.

2 [https://mohfw.gov.in/sites/default/files/Population%20Projection%20Report%202011-2036%20-%20upload\\_compressed\\_0.pdf](https://mohfw.gov.in/sites/default/files/Population%20Projection%20Report%202011-2036%20-%20upload_compressed_0.pdf)

3 [https://www.mospi.gov.in/sites/default/files/publication\\_reports/MultipleIndicatorSurveyinIndiaf.pdf](https://www.mospi.gov.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/MultipleIndicatorSurveyinIndiaf.pdf)

4 Labour Force Participation refers to the share of a population that is either working (employed) or actively looking for work (unemployed but seeking jobs).

lower 28.8 percent for females. Among those who are part of the labour force, the youth unemployment rate is high at 10.2 percent, compared to 3.2 percent for the overall 15+ population.<sup>5</sup>

## The Root of the Problem: Systemic Absence of Career Guidance

Our research across multiple states finds that in the absence of timely and relevant support, students often make decisions that don't align with labour market realities. This leads to educational misalignment, unrealistic aspirations, high dropout rates, and poor job retention—ultimately weakening the education-to-employment transition.

Laxmi who didn't know what to do after graduation, isn't alone. Our research documents many cases where students make irreversible educational choices without understanding their consequences; lose precious years waiting on highly competitive government jobs; or enter the workforce unprepared for real-world demands.

These problems are particularly pronounced among young women and in rural areas. With limited access to information, virtually absent career guidance services, and social norms restricting mobility and decision-making, girls are often guided by family or community expectations rather than labour market trends,

with many unaware of the full range of options available to them.

Students at all levels of education, secondary school, higher education and vocational training, lack awareness of career options that align with their interests, what qualifications they require, and the job opportunities available across different sectors. Often, they choose a course because someone in their family or social circle suggested it, rather than through informed decision-making. About 34 percent of respondents in a study cited family and friends as the key influencers in their career decisions<sup>6</sup>, highlighting the absence of structured, labour-market-informed guidance.

These outcomes also reflect a deeper systems gap. While the student is at the centre, the ecosystem of samaaj, sarkaar, and bazaar – families and communities, education departments and ministries, and the job market – often does not come together in a way that provides timely mentorship, exposure, or clear pathways. In the absence of campus-based structures that provide peer networks, workplace exposure, and career counseling, students are left to navigate this complex environment largely on their own.

A major contributing factor to this systemic gap is a lack of supporting infrastructure in educational institutions. Very few institutions have dedicated, trained career counsellors who are equipped to support students with self-awareness in terms

5 Annual Report, Periodic Labour Force Survey, 2023-24. [https://www.mospi.gov.in/sites/default/files/publication\\_reports/AnnualReport\\_PLFS2023-24L2.pdf](https://www.mospi.gov.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/AnnualReport_PLFS2023-24L2.pdf)

6 <https://knowledge.unicef.org/india/resource/bharat-career-aspirations-report-2024>

of their interests, aspirations and qualifications and the practical aspects of navigating the job market. In addition, educational institutions typically operate in isolation from real-time data on local employment opportunities, salary ranges, and in-demand skills making it difficult to offer relevant advice. This is further compounded by low awareness across the ecosystem: students, parents, and even educators often lack an understanding of career planning principles or the full range of available education-to-employment pathways. Parents especially have very limited awareness about newer or less traditional career paths, making it harder for young people to explore alternatives beyond the familiar.

Global evidence highlights that these challenges are not unique to India; robust career guidance can significantly improve education-to-employment outcomes. Recent literature from international

organizations highlights the critical role of career guidance in preparing youth for an increasingly complex labour market. An OECD research report analysing longitudinal data from 10 countries confirms that teenagers who participate in career guidance activities “can very often be expected to experience lower rates of unemployment, higher wages and greater job satisfaction as young adults.” The OECD emphasizes integrating career readiness into school curricula through activities such as career exploration, work-based learning, and employer engagement to enhance young people’s ability to make informed educational and occupational choices.<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, the European Training Foundation (ETF) highlights that effective career guidance helps individuals reach their potential, economies become more efficient, and societies become fairer.<sup>8</sup> Several international organizations<sup>9</sup> have

Girls are often guided by family or community expectations rather than labour market trends, and many are **unaware of the full range of options available to them.**

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The absence of a structured career guidance rooted in effective labour market information **leads them to make ill-informed choices, without fully considering - how to realize their own aspirations or meet the demands of the job market.**

7 <https://oecdeditoday.com/preparing-youth-for-work-what-works-career-guidance/>

8 [https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-09/investing\\_in\\_career\\_guidance.pdf?deliveryName=FCP\\_5\\_DM176217](https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-09/investing_in_career_guidance.pdf?deliveryName=FCP_5_DM176217)

9 Including the European Training Foundation (ETF), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the International Labour Organization (ILO), the European Commission, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP).

emphasized the importance of investing in career guidance to ensure that individuals can make informed educational, training related, and occupational choices and navigate transitions smoothly. The World Bank too, highlights the importance of accessible guidance services in helping youth align aspirations with available opportunities, reduce underemployment,

and develop sustainable career pathways.<sup>10</sup> Collectively, these studies point to the need for integrated, locally accessible, and proactive career guidance systems that can support lifelong learning, improve labour market outcomes, and enhance overall job satisfaction for youth globally.

## Evidence: Voices from the Field

### What Students Tell Us

During our field visits and stakeholder consultations, students repeatedly shared that they lacked access to reliable and structured career information. Many expressed uncertainty not only about available job options but also about what those jobs would entail—such as the conditions of work, pathways for growth, or the salary range.

In addition to limited information, students also showed a broader lack of awareness about their own interests, strengths, and long-term goals. For many, career decisions were shaped by peer influence, family / societal pressure, or common narratives such as the prestige, better pay, and security of a government job, rather than by an informed understanding of what they want to pursue and the opportunities available to them.

Several students mentioned that while they

were aware of a few familiar job types—mainly government jobs or well-known private sector roles—they had very little exposure to other opportunities or clarity on what different sectors offer in terms of availability, requirements, or career progression. As a result, their aspirations tend to cluster around a narrow set of roles—often disconnected from labour market realities or personal aptitude.

This combination of limited external information and internal clarity makes it difficult for students to make confident, well-aligned decisions. Many either delay entering the workforce or pursue paths that don't match their expectations or interests.

These insights underscore the urgent need for early, continuous, and context-specific career guidance to support young people in navigating education-to-employment transitions more effectively.

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<sup>10</sup> [https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/3530311d366747cbe5e1b1a4361f0056-0200022022/related/Skills4Dev-March-2023.pdf?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/3530311d366747cbe5e1b1a4361f0056-0200022022/related/Skills4Dev-March-2023.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

## What students tell us

- » Students reported limited access to reliable career information, leaving them uncertain about job options, work conditions, growth pathways, and salaries.
- » Career decisions were often driven by peer influence, family pressure, and the lure of government jobs, rather than informed choices aligned with interests or opportunities.
- » Most students had little exposure to diverse career options, leading to aspirations clustered around a narrow set of roles disconnected from labour market realities.
- » Many lacked self-awareness about their strengths and goals, making it harder to choose well-suited career paths.
- » This combination of information gaps and lack of guidance often resulted in delayed workforce entry or mismatched career choices, underscoring the need for early and continuous career guidance.

## What Educators Observe

Principals and teachers echoed many of the concerns raised by students, offering their own perspective on the challenges of guiding young people through education-to-work transitions. They pointed out that students often come with unrealistic expectations about what different careers can offer, particularly in terms of salaries, job security, and working conditions. When these expectations are not met during training or at the workplace, students become quickly disillusioned, contributing to high dropout rates.

Educators also observed that many students select educational streams without a clear understanding

of their career implications, often following peers or social pressures rather than a considered plan. This mismatch between study choices and future opportunities leaves students underprepared for the realities of the labour market. Even when training leads to job placements, educators reported that students frequently refuse positions that do not align with their preconceived notions of “good” jobs—such as those perceived as low-status, physically demanding, or offering less immediate financial reward. These patterns, according to principals and teachers, reflect not only gaps in information but also the absence of sustained guidance to help students form realistic and informed aspirations.

**Their aspirations tend to cluster around a narrow set of roles—often disconnected from labour market realities or personal aptitude.**

## What educators observe

Principals and teachers across institutions reported similar patterns:

- » Students harbour "unrealistic expectations" about career prospects and workplace conditions.
- » High dropout rates correlate directly with unmet expectations about job roles and compensation.
- » Students often choose educational streams without understanding career implications.
- » Many students refuse job placements that don't match their preconceived notions.

## What Employers Experience

Industry representatives painted a stark picture of workforce readiness challenges:

*"There are jobs, but there are no suitable candidates. Even when we offer placements, students don't join. We have to over-hire because we know many will quit within months."* - mentioned the Human Resources manager at a Japanese automotive company.

Employers consistently raise concerns about high dropout rates and poor job retention among fresh recruits. A major contributing factor is that many young people accept positions without fully understanding role requirements, only to discover later that the job doesn't suit them. This leads to resignation and extended unemployment periods while waiting for the "right opportunity"

Common reasons for high attrition include:

- Disillusionment about the physical demands and conditions of work; for example, the requirement to stand for long hours, or specific start times, and general working hours
- Disappointment regarding compensation even when the compensation is aligned to market rates<sup>11</sup>
- A lack of mental preparation for workplace hierarchies and discipline
- Unrealistic expectations about career progression timelines
- Misunderstanding about what the role entails leading to a poor fit between the job and the worker

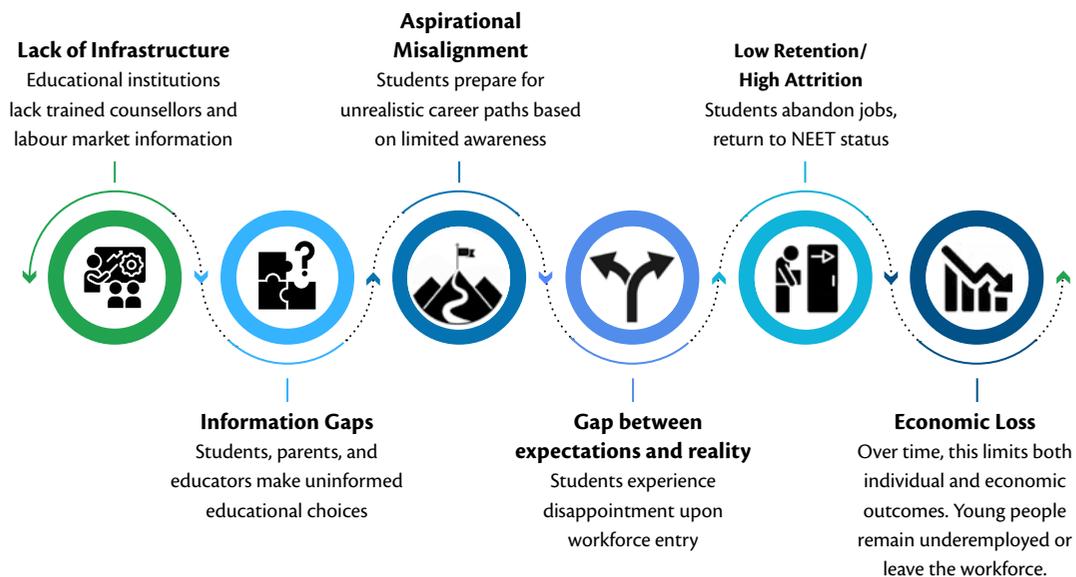
<sup>11</sup> This finding has also been highlighted in the literature. For example, a 2019 JustJobs Network report noted that youth have high expectations regarding their income-generating potential. In response to a question in a YouGov-Mint survey (as reported in the same JN report), the majority of youth aged 18–21 expected to earn at least INR 30,000 per month as their starting salary. For context, over 80 percent of working women and men in India earn less than INR 10,000 per month ([Breaking the Cycle of Vulnerability Education, Skills and Employability for Indian Youth, 2019](#)).

## What employers experience

- » Employers report a shortage of suitable candidates despite available jobs.
- » High dropout rates and poor job retention are recurring concerns.
- » Many young people accept roles without understanding requirements, leading to quick resignations.
- » Attrition is commonly driven by poor alignment between expectations and reality — including physical demands, working hours, compensation, workplace discipline, progression timelines, and job-role fit.

## The Cycle of Disconnection

The data points to a recurring pattern that affects many students as they move from education to work.



## Career Guidance as an Important Part of the Solution

Career guidance is a crucial solution to bridge the gap between students' aspirations and market realities. A well-designed career guidance system helps students make informed choices about their future by providing them with structured support throughout their education to employment journey. By offering clarity on career pathways, students can explore options aligned with their interests and aptitudes, understand the skills required for different industries, and chart a realistic roadmap for their goals. Importantly, in today's dynamic labour market—where young people are likely to change jobs and even careers multiple times—career guidance

must be conceived as a continuous process rather than a one-time intervention. Sustained guidance equips youth to adapt, re-skill, and make confident transitions as opportunities and aspirations evolve.

Career guidance is crucial at every stage of education, from school and higher education to vocational and technical training. It helps students make informed decisions based on industry demand, personal strengths, and long-term prospects. With better awareness and guidance, students gain confidence in their choices, which improves job satisfaction and retention.

### How Career Guidance Helped Shalini Discover New Career Possibilities

- » For Shalini, a fourth-year M.Sc. Agriculture student from Chandra Bhanu Gupta Agriculture Post Graduate College, life in Lucknow was steady and familiar. As the youngest in her family, she was often seen as quiet and protected, rarely stepping far from home. So, when her friends encouraged her to join a career guidance initiative that offered industry exposure and hands-on learning, she decided to give it a try—expecting it to be just a small break from routine.
- » What began as a casual decision gradually opened new perspectives. Through mock interviews, industry interactions, and an internship with the Nestlé Progressive Foundation, Shalini experienced the range of possibilities within the agriculture sector. The exposure helped her understand different career paths and built a steady confidence in her abilities.
- » Today, Shalini plans to continue her studies while working in the agricultural sector, with a clearer sense of direction and a willingness to explore new opportunities. Looking back, she feels that career guidance played an important role in helping her understand her strengths and broaden her view of what her future could look like.

*Story contributed by: Medha*

Moreover, career guidance helps students avoid common pitfalls, such as pursuing careers based on peer pressure or societal expectations, which often lead to frustration, dropouts, and frequent job changes. By aligning personal interests with market realities, students can make informed

decisions that enhance both their career success and earning potential. Ultimately, career guidance benefits not just individuals but also the broader workforce—building a more skilled, adaptable, and future-ready talent pool.

## Current Landscape: Promising Foundations, Missing Coordination

NEP 2020: Recognising this gap, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 highlights the importance of career guidance and recommends the creation of a database of volunteers—including retired professionals, alumni, and educators—to provide career counselling and mentorship to students in schools. While this is a welcome step, it needs to be accompanied by a clear and concrete plan of action to ensure structured implementation. Moreover, similar career guidance mechanisms are needed in higher education and training institutions to provide continuous support throughout a student's educational journey, enabling informed decisions about further studies and career paths.

Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) Innovation Filling the Gap: Our fieldwork across various states showed that in the absence of a formal system, several non-governmental organisations are stepping in to fill this gap. They provide career guidance, mentorship, and exposure to role models—particularly for students from vulnerable backgrounds. They work closely with educational institutions and state

governments to deliver and scale such services, with some state systems even adopting these models. Their efforts go beyond sharing career information, incorporating interactive sessions, talks with professionals from similar socio-economic backgrounds, and industry exposure visits—helping students visualise career paths that feel both accessible and achievable. A key strength of NGOs is their deep engagement with local communities, families, and geographies, which gives them a nuanced understanding of the real challenges and aspirations of young people. This grounded perspective enables them to design support that feels relevant and actionable in specific contexts.

While NGO-led initiatives have demonstrated significant impact, their long-term sustainability depends on ongoing support from their donors and on systemic integration over time. Central and state governments can play a pivotal role by adopting and institutionalizing such models, building on the proven practices and innovations developed by these organisations.

# The Path Forward: Building on Existing Foundations

India must move beyond piecemeal efforts and take a systemic approach to career guidance—one that combines evidence-based interventions with the infrastructure required to sustain them. International research, such as that highlighted by the OECD, provides a strong foundation.<sup>12</sup> Our field findings underscore the need to institutionalise proven models while adapting them to local contexts.

## 1. Implement Proven Interventions

Evidence from successful models shows that specific interventions can significantly improve young people's career clarity, confidence, and readiness for work. These should be introduced across schools and vocational training institutes, including ITIs and polytechnics through structured programming:

- Career conversations with trained facilitators to help students reflect on their interests, link them to subject-related and cross-disciplinary career options, and create informed personal plans
- Workplace visits and job shadowing to expose students to real work environments
- Career talks and expert sessions featuring professionals from a range of industries,

including those from similar socio-economic or regional backgrounds, to make pathways relatable and aspirational

- Job fairs and career days that bring together multiple employers, training providers, and higher education institutions in one place, offering students a broad view of opportunities
- Application and interview skills training covering resume building, portfolio preparation, communication skills, and mock interviews to improve workforce entry success rates
- Short, job-focused programmes should match local labour market needs while also helping young people gain portable skills that prepare them for opportunities in other regions if they choose to migrate. This dual approach ensures relevance for locally rooted youth as well as those seeking mobility

These activities need to be systematic and regular, rather than one-off add-ons. The National Education Policy (NEP) already emphasises the importance of integrating career guidance within the broader education framework, and models like Medha's show how this can be operationalised through structured, ongoing engagement embedded in the educational timetable and co-curricular activities.

<sup>12</sup> <https://oecdeditoday.com/preparing-youth-for-work-what-works-career-guidance/>

## Medha's Operational Model at Scale



- » **Student-Centric Approach:** This model places students at the core of the education-to-employment ecosystem, with their outcomes shaped by society, government systems, and the labour market.
- » **Campus as a Key Platform:** Medha treats the campus as a central hub within the wider academic ecosystem—connecting departments, state and national education systems, and the labour market. On campus, students access mentorship, career counselling, and opportunities for work-based learning alongside 21st-century skills such as communication, critical thinking, collaboration, and creativity. When these interventions are embedded in routine campus life and linked to the surrounding *samaaj-sarkaar-bazaar* ecosystem, students are not only better informed but also better equipped to act on emerging opportunities.
- » **Policy & Curriculum Support:** The organisation supports state and central departments through evidence-based inputs that strengthen curriculum, improve implementation, and enable policies that expand safe and accessible work-based learning opportunities.
- » **Industry Engagement:** On the market side, it facilitates stronger engagement with industry to promote equitable work environments, fair entry-level wages, and increased internships and apprenticeships for students.
- » **Capacity Building:** Across higher, technical, secondary, and vocational education, it builds the capacities of system actors in 21st-century skills, socio-emotional learning, career readiness, and industry linkage processes.
- » **Scaling Impact:** These efforts equip institutions to create inclusive learning spaces, sustain alumni networks, and ultimately improve education-to-employment pathways at scale.

## 2. Build Supportive Infrastructure

Effective implementation depends on strengthening institutional capacity and ecosystem awareness:

- Regularly updated labour market information systems that provide schools and training institutions with accessible data on regional employment trends, salary benchmarks, and emerging sectors
- Dedicated training and certification programmes for career counsellors to ensure consistent, high-quality guidance
- Integration of career guidance modules into pre-service and in-service teacher training, enabling educators to initiate meaningful, subject-linked career conversations with students
- Awareness campaigns for parents and educators to build understanding of diverse career pathways and the importance of early career planning
- Systematic integration of proven NGO-led innovations into public education systems through structured partnerships, ensuring scalability and sustainability

## 3. Institutionalise for Long-Term Impact

Integrate career guidance into national and state education policies as a core element of vocational education programmes, just as it is mandated in schools, with a clear action plan for structured implementation.

Policy design should ensure that mentorship and career counselling are supported by concrete system-wide enablers. These include mandates and incentives that make work-based learning safer and more accessible—such as insurance cover for students in factory or workplace environments, transport passes for travel to internships, on-the-job trainings, industry trainings and apprenticeships, and clear guidance for institutions to build and maintain alumni networks. In parallel, policies that encourage industry to improve work conditions, promote gender-equitable practices, and offer fair wages to freshers help ensure that the pathways opened by mentors and 21st century skill-building translate into real, sustainable opportunities for young people.

Embed career counselling metrics into educational institutes' evaluation frameworks to create accountability for delivery and quality.

Establish monitoring and evaluation systems that track student feedback, post-graduation pathways, and the impact on aspirations and employment outcomes.

Develop advanced, tech-enabled guidance tools for personalised support, but noting that technology should be a supplement to a human interface, not a replacement. Technology cannot address the societal, local contextual factors that necessarily entail subjective assessments.

## Call to Action

India stands at a demographic crossroads. Its 371 million youth represent either its greatest asset or its greatest challenge—the choice depends on policy decisions made today.

The cost of continued inaction is clear: With over 120 million young people trapped in NEET status and persistent unemployment, it is a waste of our demographic advantage. The crisis disproportionately affects young women and rural youth, perpetuating inequality and limiting India's inclusive growth potential. Each year of delay means another cohort of youth making uninformed decisions that will shape their lifetime earning potential.

The solution is within reach: Evidence from our field research, successful NGO innovations, and the foundation laid by NEP 2020 provide a clear roadmap for comprehensive career guidance reform. The technology exists, stakeholders

are willing to engage, and proven models demonstrate impact.

Career guidance is not just about individual success—it builds a more skilled, adaptable, and future-ready workforce for the country. Well-designed career guidance systems help students balance personal interests with market demand, improving retention in both education and employment while enhancing earning opportunities.

At the same time, career guidance should be seen as one critical piece of a larger ecosystem. On its own, it cannot solve all the challenges in the education-to-employment transition. It must work in tandem with broader reforms in skilling, labour market opportunities, and gender and social equity measures. Only by strengthening the entire system can India unlock the full potential of its demographic dividend.





# JustJobs

NETWORK

JustJobs Network is an applied research organisation finding evidence-based solutions to one of the most pressing challenges of our time: How to promote better work in a rapidly changing 21st-century economy. We produce research on good job creation and workforce development, focusing our work on the critical knowledge gaps in the employment landscape.

JustJobs convenes a global network of diverse stakeholders—including policy shapers, academics, and grassroots leaders—to deepen the practical implications of our research and amplify its impact. Through the combination of cutting-edge research and global knowledge sharing, we aim to forge a fresh, dynamic channel for policy dialogue on employment at national, regional and international levels. Our team members are based in New Delhi and Washington, D.C.



Medha better prepares youth for life after school. Our combination of 21st-century skills training, career counseling, and alumni support propels young people onto rewarding career paths of their choice.

Since 2011, we have improved workplace engagement, income growth, and female labor force participation for over 200,000 students across more than 1,000 educational institutions.