

## Taking on the education Nazis

The only way to convert growth into poverty reduction is by reforming how we look at our human capital

BY MANISH SABHARWAL

**T**he election outcome is exciting and will rekindle animal spirits, but the difficult climate at the moment in hiring has hardly flipped. More importantly, unemployment continues to be a bigger problem than unemployment. So even if high growth and investment rates return, most Indians are not equipped to take advantage of the high tide. Converting growth into poverty reduction requires changing the occupational profile for most Indians from its perpetual low tide (with poor productivity and low incomes). That needs a bold and sustained overhaul of our school, college and vocational training regime.

The bad news is our current education Nazis believe that quantity cannot be expanded without compromising quality. But their flawed argument does not recognize the power of reflexivity, time, choice and competition. The good news is the new government has the counsel of many smartly and recently synthesized recommendations: the National Knowledge Commission, the national skill policy, the apprenticeship regime revamp, the Yash Pal committee, and much else. This government's glory lies in spending the next five years focusing on execution and reducing the transmission losses between theory and practice (and, consequently, between outlays and outcomes). Reforms should be pivoted around three buckets:

**Quantity:** Even if we fill up every current school, Industrial Training Institute (ITI) and college seat, it will not be enough for our demographic bulge. The current system is incapable of delivering the scale and pace of expansion needed because it lacks imagination, boldness

and a willingness to experiment. We need to end the licence *raj* in school, vocational and higher education because the good is not the enemy of the great and a mediocre school is better than no school. The government must remove the qualitative, procedural and quantitative barriers to capacity expansion by abolishing the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), allowing for-profit schools, removing the 25% private school reservation in the Right to Education Bill, including school policy in urban planning and forming an outcome-focused regulatory body.

**Quality:** Quality needs two interventions—performance enabling and management. On average, our current school, college and vocational systems do not generate the desired learning outcomes or produce “work-ready” candidates. Performance enabling involves decentralization, autonomy, teaching resources, teacher training, exam reform, assessment tools, and much else. Performance management requires creating a fear of falling and hope of rising; for example, 35% of government teachers do not show up in school every day because there is no punishment or reward. We must implement the national

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skill policy (enforcing its operating principles would hold at least 55% of government skill programmes in violation). Most importantly, we must shift our state funding model from underwriting institutional expenses (salaries, pension and rent) to underwriting student fees, because government money being available only through and for government delivery creates laziness, complacency, and hostages (not clients). The quality debate often degenerates into private versus public delivery, but it should be about choice and outcomes.

**Inclusiveness:** The lack of equality of opportunity means that it is almost impossible for most children to escape their financial, social and geographic opening balance (the ovarian lottery). Our human capital regime must equip traditionally disadvantaged populations to leapfrog into organized labour markets. This agenda involves converting rural employment exchanges and ITIs into ca-

reer centres, creating low-cost housing for migrants, revamping state financing (as highlighted above), revamping the Apprenticeship Act, providing viability gap funding for rural institutions, making skills integral to reimbursements from the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), and expanding English education.

Is there optimal sequencing between quantity and quality? Can we raise quantity by creating competition without compromising quality? While there is probably no “right” answer, public policy must err towards quantity, competition and the long view. Quantity may be prioritized over quality because quality interventions take time and need more political will; for instance, now that the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and midday meals have gotten children into school classrooms, we can focus on learning outcomes, teacher absenteeism and multigrade teaching. We must take a “time view” of quality—T.V.

Mohandas Pai of Infosys confirms that most of the engineering colleges started in the 1980s and 1990s in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh were crappy, but they learnt rapidly and seeded the supply chain for the technology industry's voracious appetite. There is huge value in competition; the 40% drop in the engineering “coaching *mandi*” business in Kanpur this year is an unintended consequence of 192 new colleges at the Uttar Pradesh Technical University, with 69,000 engineering seats.

Quantity, quality and inclusiveness in education are closely related and influence each other in non-linear ways. But only capacity expansion, performance enabling and performance accountability can truly and sustainably move the needle on bridging the education gaps.

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