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The Need For Reforms In The Education Sector

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(The editorial is based on the article “The Need For Reforms In The Education Sector” which appears in Livemint on 30 November 2018. It analyses the education sector in India.)

Background

Lack of skill among youth stands one of the reasons for prevailing high rate of unemployment in the country and when we think about the future of work—and all the jobs that will have to be created for India’s expanding youth population—**we should hold one thought above all in mind: most children who are currently in primary school will be earning their living in employment that don’t yet exist.** As an example, just consider that today India is home to 4 million app developers—a work sector that did not exist less than three decades ago.

These transformations in society are the result of technological progress. In a short space of time, the word “Amazon” has gone from meaning a mighty river in South America to one of the largest online retailers in the world. These transformations in society are the result of technological progress.

Need for Reforms

- **Digital technologies are changing the shape of work before our eyes.**
- These technologies are enabling firms to automate and this will reduce employment in some old, typically low and medium-skill sectors, but they also help firms to increase productivity, to innovate, and subsequently to create new products and sectors. Good news is that emerging markets like India stand to gain—but they need to have the right skills at the ready.
- **The demand for certain skills is going up in today’s labour markets.** These skills include complex problem-solving and analysis, and social skills such as teamwork and relationship management. Reasoning and self-efficacy are also increasingly important, particularly as they improve adaptability.

- **In a survey of employers of engineers in India, socio-behavioural skills were ranked at or above technical qualifications and credentials in terms of their significance for the employability of recent graduates.** Building these skills requires strong human capital foundations—and building these foundations is especially important in early childhood development.
- **According to the World Development Report 2019, India needs to focus even more strongly on the quality of education it offers to its greatest asset—its citizens.**

What Kind of Reforms Are Needed?

- First, India's education system requires more flexibility between the general and technical tracks.
- Second, it must focus more on building socio-behavioural skills like self-efficacy and teamwork.
- And third, it must ensure that specific universities become effective innovation clusters. For example, as part of the Startup India initiative, seven new research parks had been established on Indian Institute of Technology campuses to promote innovation through incubation and collaboration between universities and private sector firms. More initiatives like these are needed.

Education, employment and the future of work:

- **Every year, 12 million youth enter the labour market in India.** By 2030, the country will have 123 million 25- to 29-year-old citizens. Bolstered by social media, their aspirations will be high. For these young people, many of whom did not graduate with a high-school diploma, adult learning programmes and forms of tertiary education will be the only remaining path to adequate skills development.
- According to some estimates, **only 24% of 18- to 37-year-olds who dropped out of school before completing the primary level can read.**
- **India's tertiary education system is the second largest in the world, after China.** It is home to more than 35 million students and over 50,000 institutions. The most prestigious institutions within this system have global standing and are responsible for making India a world leader in the high-tech sector. But for this success to be taken to the next level, India's tertiary education system needs urgent reforms.
- **India also needs to overhaul its short-term skilling programmes.**
- Lastly, **adult learning is an important channel for readjusting skills to fit in the future of work,** and it would benefit from a serious design rethink. Pedagogies that are customized to the adult brain, along with flexible delivery models that fit in well with adult lifestyles, can make adult learning programmes more effective.

Way Forward

- To build a society with sensible character and citizenship, it's vital that **value education be introduced in pre-school and strengthened in primary, secondary and higher education**. Since most of these traits are learnt by infants up to the age of 5-6, if children miss out during this period in life, it is hard to catch up. **These foundations can be easily established through effective early childhood development programmes and basic education. Investments in nutrition, health and stimulation in the first thousand days of life also build stronger brains.**
- **Through investments in this area—what is called foundational human capital—India can prepare its people for the coming shifts in jobs, skills and market structures.** Lack of investments, instead, will leave future generations—especially the poorest—at a severe disadvantage, amplifying inequalities that already exist. In the worst-case scenario, this might create socio-political instability when rising aspirations are met with frustration instead of opportunity.
- **Good news is that a lot of investments in human capital have already begun in India and are likely to have a positive impact in the coming years.** The shift in the education sector towards more competitive federalism and results-based financing is expected to improve accountability and learning outcomes.
- **India's agreement to participate in PISA* is a major step forward in its policy landscape that will help rank India with global peers based on education outcomes.**
- The World Bank is also serious about getting policymakers and governments to think harder about human capital. The changing nature of work makes the case for doing this. **Investing in human capital now and over the long term is an investment with profound implications for people's future prosperity and for national economic growth.**

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