

The Growing Need for Skill-Based Courses in the Colleges of Assam

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Abstract:

Assam has long grappled with high unemployment rates, consistently exceeding the national average. As of 2021, the state's unemployment rate stood at 8.2%, with only 11% of the population employed in government jobs. To address this, the state government has emphasized skill education, which aims to equip individuals with practical, workforce-relevant knowledge. Assam's historical focus on skills in areas like agriculture, weaving, and crafts has been revived through modern vocational training programs. The introduction of initiatives like the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) and the state's Skill, Employment, and Entrepreneurship Department (SEED) reflects an effort to bridge the gap between education and industry demands. B.Voc. courses, launched in Assam in 2015, represent a significant step toward integrating skill-based learning with higher education. Despite these advances, the higher education system remains predominantly knowledge-focused, leading to a mismatch between graduate skills and job market needs. Moving forward, embedding skill education into mainstream curricula is crucial for enhancing employability, reducing unemployment, and fostering economic growth. A more holistic education model, combining theory with practical experience, is essential to prepare students for Assam's evolving job market.

Keywords: unemployment, skill education, vocational training, employability, Assam

Introduction:

Assam has been facing a persistent unemployment problem for decades. The unemployment rate in the state has been consistently higher than the national average, with the latest data estimating it at 8.2%. This indicates that a large number of people in the state are not able to find stable and sustainable employment opportunities. As of 2021, the percentage of government employees in Assam is approximately 11% of the state's total population. This includes employees from state government, central government, and local government bodies.

To tackle this problem, the state government has taken various measures, including promoting skill education. Skill education refers to the development of practical and skills-based knowledge that can equip individuals to participate in the workforce. It aims to bridge the gap between the current demand for skilled workers and the available workforce by providing training and education in various fields.

Skill education in Assam has a long history dating back to ancient times. During the ancient period, education was primarily centred around developing skills in agriculture, carpentry, weaving, pottery, and other local crafts. During the medieval period, Assam was known for promoting skill education, especially in areas like pottery, weaving, and handicrafts. During the British Raj, education in Assam underwent significant changes. The British introduced a modern education system, which emphasized on English language and science. This led to a neglect of traditional skill education, as the focus shifted towards producing skilled workers for the rapidly expanding British industries.

After India gained independence in 1947, the state of Assam underwent rapid industrialization. To meet the growing demand for skilled workers, the government started vocational training programs in various fields such as engineering, agriculture, and nursing. The first National Policy on Education in 1968 emphasized the need for vocational education at the secondary level. In the 1970s, the Government of Assam also started industrial training institutes (ITIs) to provide vocational training to the youth. In the 1980s and 1990s, the government of Assam focused on expanding the reach of formal education in the state. However, this led to a neglect of skill education and a lack of integration between formal education and vocational training.

In 2009, the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC), under the initiative of a Government of India was formed to coordinate and support the development of vocational training in India. It also aims to bridge the gap between demand and supply of skilled workforce in the country. The NSDC has launched several flagship programs to promote skill development and vocational training in diverse areas such as healthcare, retail, construction, agriculture, and tourism. These programs are designed to cater to the specific needs of different industries and are implemented through partnerships with national and international organizations. In 2014, the Government of Assam launched the Skill, Employment and Entrepreneurship Department (SEED) to oversee the implementation of skill development initiatives in the state.

It has been a long felt necessity to align Higher education with the emerging needs of the economy so as to ensure that the graduates of Higher education system have adequate knowledge and skills for employment and entrepreneurship. The Higher education system has to incorporate the requirements of various industries in its curriculum, in an innovative and flexible manner while developing a holistic and well-groomed graduate. Under the NSDC, many Sector Skill Councils (SSCs) representing respective industries have/are being established. One of the mandates of Sector Skill Councils is to develop National Occupational Standards (NOSs) for various job roles in their respective industries. It is important to embed the competencies required for specific job roles in the Higher education system for creating employable graduates.

In 2013, the University Grants Commission (UGC) has launched a scheme on skills development based Higher education as part of College/University education, leading to Bachelor of Vocation (B.Voc.) Degree at par with other Bachelor level degrees with multiple exits such as Diploma/Advanced Diploma/Degree under the NSQF. The UGC, in 2014, directed all universities and colleges to start B.Voc. courses in collaboration with industries and other stakeholders in the line of NSQF. In 2015, the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) also approved B.Voc. courses in engineering and technology areas.

The first batch of B.Voc. courses was launched in 2015-16 as additional stream in selected colleges across the country in a variety of fields such as agriculture, fashion designing, healthcare, travel and tourism, IT, retail management, banking and finance, and many more. In first batch, 8 Degree Colleges/Universities of Assam, namely Abhayapuri College, Chaiduar College, Jagiroad

College, Kaliabar College, Nazira College, Pub-Kamrup College, Sonapur College, and Tezpur University started B.Voc.. At present, total 27 Colleges of Assam are running B.Voc. courses in more than 23 trades.

Today, the Higher education ecosystem of Assam is confined only to knowledge-based approach. In a knowledge-based approach, the focus is on providing students with a strong theoretical foundation, but not skill based education for employment. In such approach, there are limited career options, lack of employability skills, overemphasis on grades, lack of practical experience and inadequate preparation for the workforce. Though many colleges have B.Voc. courses as skill courses as an additional stream, and many Colleges of Assam initiated various skill courses in collaboration with NSDC like under Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY), Pradhan Mantri Vishwakarma, etc., however, this initiative unable to fulfil the holistic need for skill-based education.

The integration of skill education with mainstream education is becoming increasingly important as societies continue to evolve and adapt to rapid technological advancements and changing job markets. There is a need for a shift in the education system towards a more holistic approach that combines theoretical knowledge with hands-on learning experiences. This can involve incorporating skill-based courses into the curriculum, providing resources and training for teachers, and adopting alternative forms of assessment that recognize and value practical skills.

One of the main advantages of integrating skill education with mainstream education is that it allows students to acquire essential skills that are in demand in the current job market. These skills may include technical skills like coding, data analysis, and digital literacy, as well as soft skills like critical thinking, communication, and problem-solving. By incorporating these skills into their education, students are better equipped to meet the demands of employers and compete in today's job market. Furthermore, integrating skill education with mainstream education can help bridge the gap between education and employment. Many employers struggle to find candidates who possess the necessary skills for the job, despite having a suitable academic background. By integrating skill education into mainstream education, institutions can work closely with industry partners to develop curriculums that align with the needs of the job market, ensuring that students are adequately prepared for the workforce.



In conclusion, skill education plays a crucial role in reducing unemployment in Assam by enhancing employability, addressing skill gaps, promoting entrepreneurship, and boosting economic growth. It is essential for the government and industries to continue investing in skill development programs to create a skilled workforce and reduce unemployment in the State.

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