

'We need a rescue package for cash-starved skill institutions'

Mint

07 Oct 2020

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Private training agencies, which do the heavy-lifting under the government skilling programmes, get some of their payments only when the trainees are successfully placed. However, the pandemic hit this model as training and placements were disrupted. In an interview, Subroto Bagchi, chairman, Odisha Skill Development Authority, says these agencies need a rescue package, including cheaper loans.

Would you say government skilling programmes are in a bit of crisis today considering that many of the training partner organisations could shut shop? The model of reimbursements after trainees get placed must have been disrupted because of the pandemic.

I believe the complexities in the skill eco-system are huge. First and foremost, the short-term skill development programmes like DDU-GKY and PMKVY are run by private training agencies. Most of them are small with very shoestring existence. Yes, their cashflow would be seriously hurt. The training programmes running when lockdown took place were abandoned and trainees went away. That money would be stuck. The training completed prior and the placements that got impacted – that money will be stuck too and their last tranche is placement-linked. On top of that, even as we are 7 months in to the epidemic with no training programmes on the ground, the overheads the agencies have, continue. In many cases, the trainers have either left or have been laid off. Now assuming that things would have to get to the so-called new normal, mobilization will be a huge issue. Then would be segregation and safe stay for residential programmes that usually, in most places, have crammed accommodation. Amidst all this, there is a lot of talk about contactless

teaching but many of us overrate digital learning because most trades do require hands-on training.

The big one staring at us in the face nationally, is the evaporation of jobs for the ITI and Polytechnic trained youth who have graduated this year. Unlike engineering graduates, most of whom come from better earning families and hence will have economic ability to survive the situation, these young people come from the bottom of the pyramid. In India, we do have an apprenticeship policy, well intended but varied in its execution and effectiveness. The Central Government should consider taking the entire graduating class of 2020 and sending them out for apprenticeship funded by the government as a special drive for a year.

What are your thoughts on how skilling programmes, going ahead, should be designed or redesigned? Professionals moved from supplier states to states where there was demand for jobs. Considering that this pattern of migration isn't sustainable now, do skilling programmes need to evolve to cater to more local employment?

We need a rescue package for the skill institutions. These could be clearing their dues on trust basis, giving them zero-interest loans for a year, suspend placement-linkage for a year and compensate them for reduced batch-sizes so that social distancing in living quarters and in training spaces can be maintained. There should be government funding for tablets so that digital content can be meaningfully pushed, I don't think people can truly learn meaningfully through Whatsapp. We need to substantially rethink the local employment idea as well as entrepreneurship development – however these are complex issues, any solution here has to be long-acting and fund based but very different from just saying Mudra loans will spell the magic. Most skill trainees at the bottom of the pyramid are not bankable and there is no risk capital available there.

What are some of the specific training programmes/courses you see as relevant in our post-covid future?

I think skill courses in healthcare, education, supply chain, food sector and finally, high-quality, relevant entrepreneurship development as well as digital capacity building are critical. We also need to put in modules on personal disaster management because crisis may not be a one-time phenomenon.

Would like an update on Odisha's skilling initiatives and the progress made over the last one year.

We have lost 18 months on the General Elections followed by Cyclone Fani and now COVID. We have lost ground to reclaim. Our four areas of focus would be to get the World Skill Centre on stream. This is a big one for us. We are looking at opening it in March despite the

COVID dislocation. Our partner ITEES, Singapore and we are working closely together on this. Secondly, we remain focused on the ITI and the biggest lesson for us is to further strengthen the ITI institution – our ITI have flourished during the lock-down. They became production hot houses making sanitizer dispensers, sample collection kiosks, ultra-violet machines for medical use, masks and things to help the fight against the pandemic. We are looking at how the ITI can raise its level to provide short-term training, Recognition for Prior Learning, assessment for other training organizations, train-the trainers and so on. With World Skill Centres and strong ITI, our spring-back capability is high. Thirdly, we need to get our act together to revamp the centrally coordinated short-term training and even though we run them, the modalities, the Standard Operating Procedures flow from Delhi. We are looking at a large-scale counselling exercise at the grassroot level as well as piloting initiatives to create synergy between skill development and the New Education Policy for which task forces are on the anvil. Finally, just before the lockdown, we had initiated a future-backward exercise for creating the State's Skill Vision 2030. This is an important one for us because the Skill Vision will be the mother document that would then lead to the Skill Policy, the Skill Budget and the Skill Implementation, taking a long view of time. This would be accelerated.

Besides, we are stepping up engagement with partners that have a big reach in digital. We are building deep engagement with MOOC platforms like Coursera and tech-companies like CISCO and SAP. We are also, reinventing life-skill education for ITI students and digital capacity building of ITI teachers with help from partners like Tata Strive.

With COVID, we would need to factor in many of the newly learnt lessons in what we do, how we do.

We remain committed to stay the course. All in all, we will return. We will prevail. We owe it to our children.