

Vocation sans educat

There has been a lot of talk in the country recently of the need to focus on science and technology in the higher education area, and how we can have major breakthroughs in export sector if we focus on information technology in particular. And parallel to this there has been a significant growth in IT related education and training, and even universities have focused a lot of their attention in the area. The mushrooming of computer colleges across the country is also an indication of how the IT boom has been internalised within the area of higher education. The issue that needs to be focused on, in more detail, is slightly different. We need to understand the connection between vocational training and education, and the differences and overlaps between the two. Unless we do, there is sufficient likelihood that we will mistake one for the other and harm the medium to long-term interests of the country in the field of education.



Education has the purpose of not only equipping the recipient with the basic skills of literacy and numeracy but for equipping the person with tools that can be used for thinking, for continuing one's learning, for being an acceptable citizen and for performing tasks that productive citizens like to pursue. And herein lies the key difference between education and vocational training. Education has a much broader scope than vocational training: it equips the individual for performing other roles in life as well, or at least it should. While vocational training is merely to provide certain skills to an individual, albeit skills that might be in high demand in the labour market.

HEC and rhetoric from government has focused attention on the potential of IT and has not looked into the potential problems that this could create in higher education. Here is a sample of issues. Parents, young men and women feel that even in their O' Levels and A' Levels they should be taking vocational subjects like computer applications, and accounting and finance. Or they feel that since these subjects are easier to score in, and definitely easier at a conceptual level than say mathematics and physics, and colleges just want a requisite number of As and do not care about the subjects that have been studied at the high school level, they are better off pursuing these easier subjects.

At the undergraduate level the problem becomes even more severe. Parents and students keep saying that they want to do subjects that will get them very high-flying well-paid jobs as soon as they complete their undergraduate education. So they prefer business studies and computer science to basic social and pure sciences and humanities. It is not only that literature, philosophy and most of the social sciences are considered to be a 'waste of time and money'; it is also that even within the physical sciences the emphasis is on practical things and vocational aspects.

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Good education is not only about skills - it is about the ability to think and learn new things on one's own.

The story at the master's level is dismal. MBA was the rage a few years ago and still holds a lot of lustre, and MCS is the new rage. Few other areas (barring medicine, which is a different story altogether) hold as much promise and are host to more hope.

It is seldom realised what this way of looking at education is doing to our children. We are bringing up children in our country, even in the more privileged classes who have access to better schools and the best of 'English Medium' who do not know much about our culture, heritage, history, religion, sociology, literature or political life. But it is not that they are just distant from our culture but have been exposed to the Greek, Latin or the English cultures. Not at all. There are few who fall in love with Shakespeare or Greek philosophy or literature by the time they finish high school in Pakistan. In fact they have not been exposed to any of these. Instead, they have been given some skills in manipulating a few formulae (mathematics if it is taken at all), a few numbers and columns (business studies, accounting and finance at high school level is nothing more than credit-debit and some basics of marketing) and a few basic computer skills (again at school level skills cannot go much further than the basics).

What parents and children themselves and policy makers of the country are missing is that good education is not only about these skills. It is about ability to think, to learn new things on one's own, to be able to change one's own skill, and to innovate and create in spheres one is involved in. It does not matter what area you are in. A good plumber or a good physicist will understand the concepts of his/her practice and will be able to internalise principles to the point that he/she can play with them. Only then will he/she be able to master the subject and even be good at their chosen vocation. So by limiting their education to vocational training alone, and from early days (school level), and even there restricting it to only vocational training without imparting knowledge of underlying principles, we actually limit a person's ability to be good at their chosen vocation too.

Furthermore, even in a vocation skills evolve and change, sometimes radically, and if the person has not been trained to accept change or even spearhead it, and is tied to particular ways of doing things, the person is bound to get obsolete and insecure. Again,

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this is not restricted to vocations that use technology alone. It applies equally to people, like bureaucrats, who develop particular ways of doing things. If they do not have a good education in the principles of public administration, organisational management and bureaucratic systems, they will be prisoners to 'on the job' learning of doing things in a particular way and will stick to that way come what may. They will not evolve with changing circumstances and will in fact resist change as much as they can. Pakistan's bureaucracy is a good example of this intransigent system.

So, a poor education, one that takes people into skills and vocations too soon, and more importantly, restricts their education to superficial protocols and does not give a sound understanding of principles in any area, results in poorly trained people even in that vocation. But the story does not end there. This sort of education makes for poor citizens as well. And this part is as important for us as the first one, if not more.

Pakistan is situated in a difficult area, and living in difficult times. It needs to have social coherence and cohesion, an active democratic socio-political system, good mechanisms for ensuring judicial and bureaucratic governance, active and growing businesses and strong performance in the areas of human development (education, health and so on). If these institutions, organisations and protocols are to be developed and entrenched, we need to put in a lot of effort into our education system. We need to produce citizens who know our history, culture and traditions and can help us devise and entrench systems that hold on to the good things in our past, and reach for modern and developed systems for the future. This does not mean that we neglect vocational training. It has to be imparted and imparted at a high enough quality level so that our businesses can compete with businesses from across the world. But vocational training should neither be at the cost of good education nor should it be of poor quality that forces our trained personnel to feel insecure, inadequate, ineffective and defensive.

There is no tradeoff between education and vocational training. We need both and we need lots of both. But we should not confuse the two either. They are not the same thing. Education is a much wider and deeper concept than training and is necessary for Pakistan to survive. It is just that we have to ensure good quality in our education. Good quality vocational training, necessary for development of our businesses, is not a requirement for citizenship and is not a necessity for every citizen of Pakistan. We should keep this distinction in mind as we plan our higher education sector, and should refrain from inflating vocational training to the level of education. And we should definitely resist the temptation of pushing children into vocational training too early and without proper prior education. Parents should also keep the distinction in mind and where resources permit, should insist on getting good quality education for their children till the bachelors level at least before thinking of vocations and requisite skills for these.

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