

THE NATIONAL SKILLS QUALIFICATION FRAMEWORK IN INDIA: THE PROMISE AND THE REALITY

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Key Highlights

- TVET provision in the country ten years ago conformed to no particular model or vision. Only 2.3% of the workforce had formally acquired any TVET, according to National Sample Survey (NSSO) in 2004-05. Unfortunately, the situation has not changed much in 2017-18, with 2.4% of the workforce having achieved formal TVET.
- NVQFs originated in advanced industrialized countries, where majority of the workforce is in formal employment. In India, in contrast, 93 per cent of workers are informally employed. This situation has been one factor behind the lack of success with NVQF implementation.
- However, there were also many systemic issues with the pre-employment TVET systems in India. The promise of the National Skills Qualification Framework (NSQF), introduced at the end of 2013, was that it should be able to address some of these issues.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There are five pillars of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) in India: a. enterprise based training; b. private and public Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs), c. the private vocational training providers (VTPs) funded by the government's National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC), d. the slowly growing vocational education in schools, and e. new central ministries conducting their own short term courses. This was the ecosystem to which the NSQF was meant to be applied. Ten years ago, but for a small number of ITIs and very limited enterprise based training in organized sector companies, most vocational training in India was on the job in informal units – which survives till date.

India's TVET system, by international standards, was, and still is, at a very rudimentary level of development – relative to India's needs. TVET was neglected in educational planning, at least until the beginning of 2007. However, this changed with the 11th Plan

(2007-12). One dimension of this change was the government's decision to adopt an Anglo-Saxon model, including a national vocational qualification framework (NVQF), while ignoring the evidence of success of the alternative global model of TVET, the Germanic one. An NVQF is not a necessary feature of a quality education and training system. Many successful TVET systems (China, several South East Asian countries) do not have an NVQF. The paper begins by spelling out what the goals of what came to be called the National Skills Qualification Framework (NSQF) in India were meant to be at secondary and tertiary level. This promise or expectation is then matched with the reality of NSQF as it was implemented. Having found that experience wanting, the paper goes on to examine



international evidence with Vocational Qualification Frameworks, both in advanced as well as emerging market economies, given that over 100 countries are at different stages of implementation of similar frameworks. The experience of other emerging and even developing economies is found to be no different than India's.

THE PROMISE

TVET provision in the country ten years ago conformed to no particular model or vision. Only 2.3% of the workforce had formally acquired any TVET, according to National Sample Survey (NSSO) in 2004-05. Unfortunately, the situation has not changed much in 2017-18, with 2.4% of the workforce having achieved formal TVET. Therefore it is critical that the focus of TVET policy makers needs to be expanding access with quality. The paper does not suggest that the NSQF has added to quality provision.

NVQFs originated in advanced industrialized countries, where majority of the workforce is in formal employment. In India, in contrast, 93 per cent of workers are informally employed (usually with no written

contract and no old age pension, death/disability insurance, maternity benefit). This situation has been one factor behind the lack of success with NVQF implementation.

However, there were also many systemic issues with the pre-employment TVET systems in India. The promise of the National Skills Qualification Framework (NSQF), introduced at the end of 2013, was that it should be able to address some of these issues.

The first was the lack of uniformity in qualifications across TVET institutions that existed before NSQF. Another was the lack of clear recognised pathways of learning for upward mobility for students in the formal vocational education and training stream of education into the tertiary education system. This lack of upward mobility undermined its credibility, and marked TVET out as not being aspirational. Third, there was lack of credibility among stakeholders due to poor quality of delivery and outcomes after training, partly due to shortage of trainers, especially teachers with industry or work experience. Fourth, TVET, unlike general education, is supposed to lead to a certain level of competence to perform tasks in an

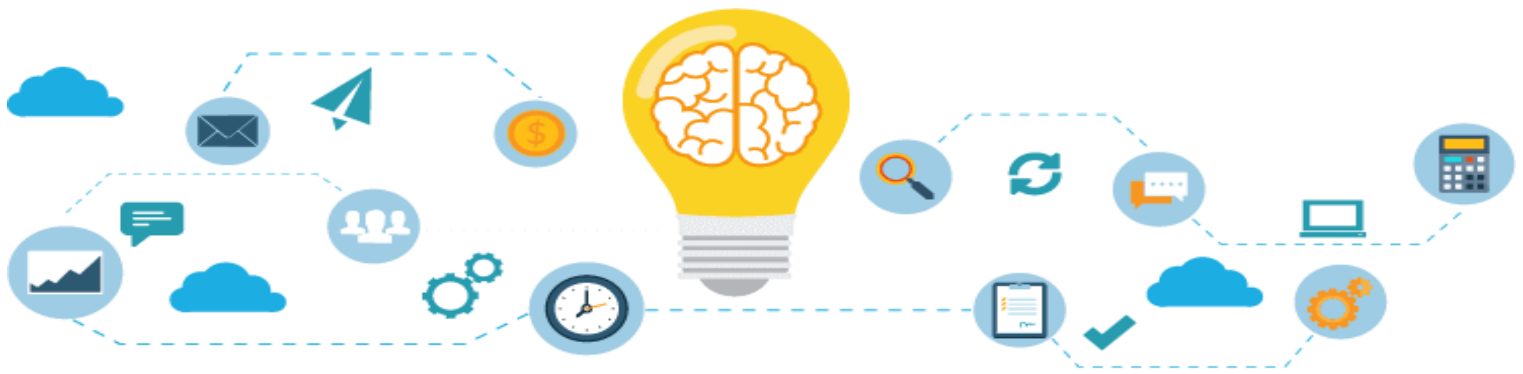
occupation. NSQF was supposed to introduce competence-based training. Fifth, there was lack of horizontal mobility in the TVET system. There should be the possibility of horizontal mobility so that the students from the vocational stream are able to enter the general education stream, if they so desire. The challenge, therefore, was to create a new system of secondary and higher secondary education where all students get an opportunity to develop vocational skills along with the academic skills.

Finally, in a highly informalized workforce, where the workforce had acquired many skills over time on the job, there was no formal recognition of informal (prior) learning.

THE REALITY OF THE IMPLEMENTATION AND OUTCOMES OF THE NSQF

The main change that occurred after the NSQF was introduced in early 2014 was that by early 2017, nearly 10 000 National Occupation Standards (NOS) were prepared, which were clubbed together into about 1900 Qualification Packs (QP), corresponding to job roles. Given the problematic process of NOS-QP preparation a very large number were prepared at break-neck speed. There





seems little evidence that the methodology followed was what should have been followed; nor did it lead to curriculum development involving relevant stakeholders.

The TVET policy makers did not confront the reality that the ecosystem was seriously short of teacher-trainers. Moreover, the majority of TVET teachers lacked any industry experience on the job. In India, senior vocational secondary school teachers often lack basic qualifications, are not in regular positions (but in ad hoc or contractual posts) and in ITIs have often received their training in ITIs themselves. In other words, an essential prerequisite of TVET reform was never really met in six years since NSQF was implemented.

The expectation was that the NSQF will lead to the emergence of a outcome-based, as opposed to an input-based, TVET system. The expectation for the NSQF (as specified by an expert group appointed by the government) was that policy makers will define 'outcomes' by 'defining the curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and certification norms'. However, unfortunately none of what the expert group had specified actually happened in reality over 2012 to 2019.

The German TVET systems (which is different in design from the Anglo-Saxon system of which NVQFs are a part) recognizes that quality outcomes only depend in part on assessment of

performance and that more significantly, they rely on the quality of provision and the partnerships between employers, the state, trade unions and TVET providers. For example, in the German dual system of TVET, it is the employers who set the examinations at the end of apprenticeships. No such thing happens in India still, in 2020.

While the promise was that competency-based curriculums (CBCs) will emerge, that will improve quality of delivery of TVET, CBCs or even the NSQF have not been recognized or accepted till 2020 in ITIs, or the central line ministry training institutions, or industry in-house training programmes. Thus India's TVET suffers from two debilitating weaknesses in this regard. The notion of CBC itself has not been recognized ecosystem-wide: three of the five pillars hardly recognize the NSQF. In addition, CBC itself has been narrowly understood even in the two remaining pillars (vocational courses for schools and NSDC-funded VTPs offering short term courses) as simply specifying NOSs and QPs (in other words, stating the outcome to be achieved), without completely rewriting the curriculum that serve as inputs to the achievement of those trainee-level outcomes.

One promise of NSQF, in fact its objective, was to enable vertical mobility of trainees. Many states have taken appropriate decisions to enable vertical progression to take place.

However, given that three of the five pillars of the TVET system have not even implemented the NSQF, it is obvious that these decisions could have been taken regardless of whether a NSQF was in place or not.

Monitoring and Evaluation should be part of any new programme in any part of government, so that after regular monitoring, and careful evaluation of outcomes, matching them against original goals, course correction can take place. There has been no attempt, since the introduction of the NSQF, to actually monitor or evaluate its performance in achieving its goals. In the National Skills Development Agency a Research Division was attempted to be created, starting in 2016. There does not seem to be any research or rigorous evaluation conducted by this Division in the public domain. An Expert Group constituted by the government, made recommendations on the NSQF (NOS-QPs), which were ignored.

While the importance of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) was recognized in the original blueprint in the NSQF, it has made limited progress. National Skills Policy 2015 set out the goal for India to train a total of 400 million workers between 2015 and 2022, of which three fourths (300 mn) were to be provided RPL. However, no particular strategy was laid out to extend RPL to these 300 mn who were already in the workforce. The result has been that RPL has been provided

as part of Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), the scheme implemented by NSDC on behalf of the government of India, but mere certification of informal workers in a matter of a day or, in some cases, little longer does not solve the problem. There is no clear thinking with regard to how RPL should be imparted, nor a systematic approach to the widespread problem.

THE INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE WITH QUALIFICATION FRAMEWORKS FOR TVET

Qualifications frameworks continue to derive popularity from the way they promise to offer simple solutions to

very real, complex problems. Unregulated labour markets (which are typical to developing countries, including India), the diversity of provision particularly within TVET systems, and qualification inflation, all aggravate the ways in which there are weak relationships between educational provision and labour markets. This is the evidence from the international experience.

Qualifications frameworks which have either succeeded in creating some buy-in and understanding of the national system of qualifications as a whole (such as in Scotland and France) are presented as proof that qualifications frameworks can improve relationships

between education provision and the labour market. But the main mechanism which is offered to developing countries in order to create a qualification framework is employer-led competency statements. This mechanism leads to complexity – undermining the aim of improving understanding of the qualification system – and does not lead to improved labour market outcomes.

There is a case for rethinking qualification frameworks globally and in India.

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