Situating Vocational Education in Social Science University: A case-study of best practices in VET

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Abstract

Vocational education in India has gained prominence in India in last decade. Investment by International organisations like World Bank, OECD and Government initiatives on Skilling India has resulted in formalising and modernising Vocational Education and Training (VET) in India (Pilz. M. & Regel. J., 2021). In the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, an emphasis is laid on re-imagining vocational education in India and makes it sought after domain with the larger formal education system. The NEP 2020 also emphasises the need to bring vocational education at par with other school subject by making it appealing and job-ready for students.

In an attempt to mainstream vocational education in University space, AUD (a social science University) launched School of Vocational Studies (SVS) in 2017. SVS was set up to provide full-time or part-time tertiary education opportunities to high school graduates of Delhi and other neighbouring states. Three batches have graduated from SVS in three verticals- BVoc in Tourism and Hospitality, B Voc. in Retail Management and BVoc in Early Childhood Centre Management Entrepreneurship.

SVS's location in a social science or liberal University space has provided it a unique character where the aim of Vocational Education and Training (as laid out by UGC and NEP 2020) meets with AUD's vision of humanistic education. This article discusses the best practices of SVS and how is it becoming a sought after programme within Delhi Vocational Education and Training chapter. The empirical part of the article describes a comprehensive view of best practices as shared by graduated students (n=160) and teachers (n=30). The article elaborates on the best practices in five themes- uniqueness about the programme, curriculum design and process, pedagogical practices, assessment policy and University support to the student. The article concludes that students and teachers valued the pedagogy and the internship model followed at SVS the most, followed by soft skill training. The article can help Academicians and VET training institutes to re-imagine VET and make it more humane for aspiring students.

Introduction

Status of Vocational Education in India

Vocational education is a concept that has been there in India from Ancient times. One can trace its practices back to those of the '*Gurukul*' and the '*Ashram*' and to the indigenous system of education in which young children are active participants or keen observers of the means of production and thereby enhancing their skills on those vocation be it farming, animal rearing, hunting and gathering, etc.

Numerable government policies (NPE 1986, POA 1992), Five-year Plans (eight, ninth, tenth, eleventh and twelfth) and Education Commissions (like Kothari Commission, 1964-66) had recommended promoting vocational education at all levels. While looking at the vocationalisation of education, Mahatma Gandhi ji's emphasis on developing the 'head, heart and hands,' (the 3 H) of young children in his experiment of the ashram life is worth mentioning. He emphasized the need for every individual to be engaged in some productive work. The philosophy can be seen as promoting the dignity of labour and pedagogically working with hands would enhance their knowledge of various subjects. Though 'Buniyadi Talim or the 'Basic Education' was in response to colonial rule and the kind of education system existing, its emphasis can also be seen as promoting self-sufficiency of the village economy in that particular historical context. Post-independence, the Kothari Commission (1964-66) recommended the need to prepare young people for 'job ready'. Thus it recommends integrating vocational education and encouraging enrolment in the vocational subjects of Senior Secondary level education for up to 50% of students. Yet, for many decades vocational and skill education had not been able to get the required push due to various reasons which are beyond the scope of the present paper.

The vocational and skill education in India has regained some prominence in India in the last decade. Investment by International organizations like World Bank, OECD and Government initiatives on 'Skilling India' has resulted in formalizing and modernizing of Vocational Education and Training (VET) in India (Pilz. M. & Regel. J., 2021). India's young and huge population provides immense human resources if properly tapped through vocational and skill education to the youth. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasises re-imagining vocational education in India and making it a sought-after domain with the larger formal education system. The NEP 2020 also emphasizes the need to bring vocational education to par with another school subject by making it appealing and job-ready for students.

VET in AUD

Dr B. R. Ambedkar University Delhi is a Delhi government state university mandated to teach and research in the area of Social Science and Humanities. After coming into existence in 2008, the University began to explore ways and means of reaching out to different sections of the people of Delhi. The aim was to explore the possibilities of providing more opportunities for those students who might have got some benefits from the progress made in the school education system, including those first-generation learners from difficult family backgrounds. While initiating the vocational education, the University considered two major things: the first is the limited opportunities available in Delhi for higher mobility for students passing out of senior secondary level to the tertiary (college/university) education system, which was and is still very limited. The second was that many researchers found that the majority of the students passing out of colleges and universities were found to be not fit for employment by the industry. Considering the two issues, the University went on to set up a School of Vocational Studies with the aim of providing more opportunities for students, including those coming from diverse social backgrounds, into the university system. Secondly, endeavour to provide the best vocational and skill education so that students who are in need of immediate job and employment are provided with the required knowledge and skill sets.

Understanding 'best' practices

In education, best practices is commonly used term but is often misunderstood or misused (Arendale, 2010). Since this paper aims to unearth the best practices in Vocational Education

and Training at a University space. In order identify best practices at SVS, it was important to understand 'what are best practices in educational context'. Arendale (2010) gave a broader definition of best practices in education. According to him, "Best Education Practices as the wide range of individual activities, policies, and programmatic approaches to achieve positive changes in student attitudes or academic behaviours." (Arendale, 2010 p. 2). Beniwal (2016), defines best practices as part of the curriculum "which motivates, engages, prompts students to learn and achieve in a similar fashion consistently" (p. 259). According to Beniwal (2016), incorporating new perspectives and innovation and the use of technology can be among the practices. However, Beniwal also states that the understanding of best practices may differ from country to country. Boven, & Morohashi, (2002) in UNESCO report on 'Best Practices using Indigenous Knowledge' identified that the practices can be called best if they have four common characteristics i.e. being innovative; bringing behavioural and attitudinal change, are sustainable; having potential to be replicated in another situation or space.

Based on different criteria, researchers have culled best practices in different field. Ana et al. (2018) in their study looked at the teaching-learning processes and the educational innovations as characters of best practices. Similarly, Stephen et al. (2020) in their research states the government roles in furthering vocational education and also effective students support mechanism for enabling students to take the right decision as an important practices for enhancing the vocational education. On the other hand both Rintala & Nokelainen (2020) in their study looked at providing the right kind of learning environments along with the expectations for and attitudes towards students constitutes the best practices. The reviewed literature highlighted that the best practices varies based on context, type of institution and the goals of the programmes. In the present paper, best practices in vocational Education within a social science University will be explored and will be situated in National Capital Region.

Research Method and Design

Research question

The study is guided by the following research questions:
Rq1: What are the views of vocational teachers and students about BVoc programmes offered in the liberal University space?
Rq2: What are the best practices offered by SVS to support students' interest and needs?

Methodology

This study aims to identify the best practices of School of Vocational Studies (SVS) to mainstream vocational education and sustain students' interest and needs. The study is situated in interpretative paradigm and aims to explore the experiences of Vocational teachers and students about best practices. Out of five qualitative approaches given by Creswell (2007), this study used the case-study approach. Case-study approach helps in developing a deeper understanding about the organization or entity through multiple data sources.

For gathering data, convenience sampling was deployed where the researcher choose graduated BVoc students of three consecutive years (2020,2021 and 2022) and 30 Faculty teaching at the SVS. A Google-form survey comprising 25-items were sent to 160 graduates of BVoc over email. The student survey comprised of a combination of MCQs and open-ended questions under nine themes:-

(a)   profile,
(b)   trajectory chosen after graduation,
(c)   professional details or higher education,
(d)   feedback about the programmes,
(e)   important skills and abilities developed,
(f)   learning process at SVS,
(g)   assessments,
(h)   faculty involved in teaching and
(i)   internships.

Each theme had three to four questions to capture students' experience comprehensively. Out of 160 students, only 48 responded to the survey form. A separate Google form questionnaire was created for Vocational Teachers teaching at SVS. The questionnaire had 9 themes- (a) profile, (b) teaching in vocational programme, technology in teaching, (c) best practices at SVS, (d) assessment policy and structure and (e) feedback. The return rate of the questionnaire was 33%.

The students' responses were followed by Focused-group discussion (FGD) with 12 students representing three programmes offered by SVS. FGD helped in understanding students' lived experience and helped in triangulating the data. The data gathered through survey, FGD and questionnaire was transcribed and analysed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis method. Thematic analysis is one of the most commonly used methods to analyze qualitative data (Clarke et al. 2015). During thematic analysis process, codes were generated to make sense of the data and were consolidated under five themes.

Limitations of the Study

•   The study is limited to a social science university and only to three graduated batches of three BVoc programmes in the service sector.
•   The study was based on the experiences of respondents and may vary in other context.

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis was carried out to analyse the collected data from students and teachers. From the students' survey and questionnaires, questions related to feedback about the programme and best practices were categorized and used for this study. The data is analysed under five themes namely uniqueness about the programme, curriculum design and process, assessment practices, Pedagogical practices and University support to the student. These themes are explained in the following paragraphs.

Uniqueness about the BVoc programmes

The BVoc programmes offered by the SVS, AUD are unique programmes because they are aligned with the vision of the Social Science University (AUD). The University envisions to promote equity, social justice with excellence and to provide such education to students who would be sensitive, informed and aware professionals serving the diverse sections of the society. The same attitude and values are integrated across all the courses of three BVoc programmes offered at SVS. Furthermore, the BVoc programmes are unique because the curriculum for each vocational programme has been designed in close partnership with industry experts. The curricula of the programmes have been designed keeping in mind the UGC and NSDC guidelines, current trends as well as the future scenario to ensure that the

programmes are dynamic and relevant for its main purpose - i.e. employability. To meet the aim of a vocational programme and situate it in the AUD, individuals from the industries, experts from institutions and practitioners from the Sector were made integral part of the curriculum designing process. A conscious decision was made to ensure that the students were provided an opportunity to enter job-market after year 1 onward based on the demands of the vertical, which is also a UGC criterion. Apart from this, the BVoc programmes have in-built mandatory internship/on-the job training component. The OJT/Internship are allocated to students from the SVS side and there are multiple MOUs as well to provide quality training sites to students (RAI, THSC, and CECED).

When the graduated students of the BVoc programmes were asked about the unique features of BVoc programmes offered at SVS, they shared teaching-learning methods (26%) followed at SVS makes it a unique programme.

Internships offered in the programme came out as the second best feature (24%) and balance of theory-praxis as the third choice (17%). In Vocational education, grooming and use of ICT is considered as most important. However, SVS graduates considered it to be least important for vocational programme (Fig.10). This aspects need to be further probed. Perhaps, the use of ICT in today's situation has become something which is considered to be normal and students are not able to appreciate its usage.
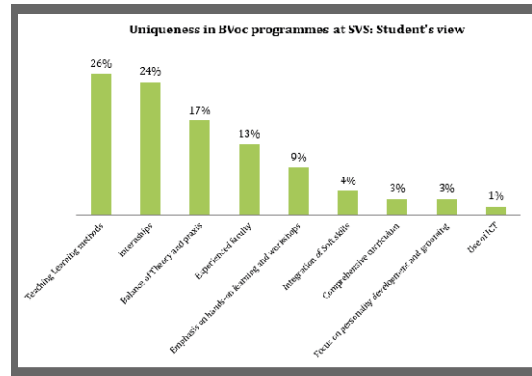

Fig. 10: Uniqueness in BVoc programmes at SVS: Student's view

Respondent code	Respondent quote
R3	"I am very much satisfied with the course offered by AUD. When I started I wasn't aware of ECCE very much but I have developed a great understanding of the field. The workshops and the courses were very informative and interesting, which further gave me practical knowledge that I apply at my workplace now."
R8	"We were taught by the best faculty in our field. The faculty from Early Childhood Care and Education background bring very different and amazing experiences for the students."
R15	"In BVoc faculty are also very supportive and they have practical experience which they use to share with us what is actually going in the industry."
R23	"The OJTs we were provided with was a big help. Some of the GEC courses taught were required to understand the social and emotional environment of the job."

Teachers were also asked similar question on unique features of BVoc programmes at SVS. According to teachers, the types of internships/OJTs offered (17%), teachers' autonomy to design their teaching-learning plan (13%), expertise of teachers and their close connection with the relevant industry/sector (13%) and job-relevant curriculum (13%) are the top-most features of the programme (Fig.11).

The students' and teachers' responses support the SVS's aim to make Bvoc programme contextualised to the market needs and maintain the humanistic touch to the courses as envisioned by the University.
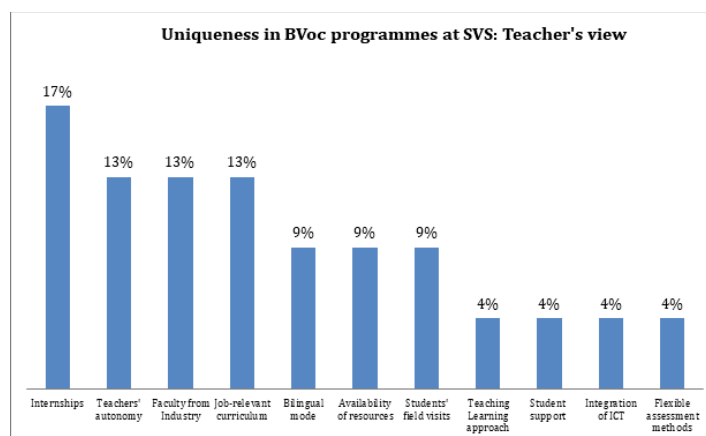

Fig. 11: Uniqueness in BVoc programmes at SVS: Teacher's view

- *Internships:* Seventeen per cent teachers highlighted the inclusion of internships as a best practice in BVoc programs at SVS. Internships provide students with practical work experience, bridging the gap between classroom learning and industry expectations.
- *Teachers' autonomy:* Thirteen percent teachers mentioned the autonomy given to teachers to design and deliver sessions based on students' needs and learning styles. This indicates that SVS encourages teachers to personalize the learning experience, tailoring it to meet the diverse requirements of the students.
- *Faculty drawn from the industry/sector:* Thirteen percent teachers emphasized the significance of having faculty members with relevant industry experience. This indicates that SVS values the expertise and practical knowledge that industry professionals bring to the classroom, enriching the learning experience for students.
- *Real-world and job-relevant curriculum*: Nine percent teachers mentioned the importance of a detailed and comprehensive curriculum that is relevant to real-world job requirements. This suggests that SVS aims to provide students with the knowledge and skills that align with industry expectations and enhance their employability.
- *Bilingual mode of teaching-learning*: Nine percent teachers mentioned the encouragement of a bilingual mode of teaching and learning, specifically using English and Hindi. This suggests that SVS recognizes the importance of catering to students who are comfortable in either language and aims to provide an inclusive learning environment.
- *Availability of resources and infrastructure*: Nine percent teachers highlighted the availability of resources such as projectors, laptops, and infrastructure at SVS. This indicates that the institution prioritizes providing the necessary tools and facilities to support effective teaching and learning.
- *Students' field visits and workshop participation*: Nine percent teachers mentioned the importance of students' participation in field visits and workshops outside the university. This suggests that SVS recognizes the value of exposing students to real-world experiences and industry settings to enhance their practical skills and knowledge.
- *Teaching Learning approach*: The teachers (4 percent) mentioned that the best practices in BVoc programs at SVS include interactive, practical, and experiential

teaching and learning approaches. These approaches involve active student engagement and hands-on learning experiences to enhance their understanding and skills.

- *Student support provided*: Four percent teacher emphasized the importance of providing student support. This indicates that SVS recognizes the significance ofoffering resources, guidance, and assistance to students to facilitate their learning and overall success.

- *Integration of ICT*: Another 4% teachers mentioned the integration of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) in the teaching and learning process. This includes using tools like presentations, quizzes, audio-video materials, etc., to enhance the effectiveness of instruction and engage students in interactive learning experiences.

- *Flexible assessment methods*: Four percent teacher highlighted the importance of using flexible assessment methods. This suggests that SVS values assessing students through varied approaches that accommodate their individual learning styles and preferences.
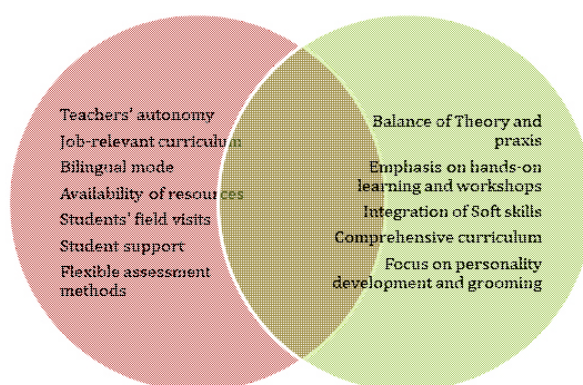

Fig. 12: Commonalities between teachers and students views about uniqueness of BVoc programmes

Curriculum Design and Process

AUD initiated the curriculum design with the help of experts and practitioners, while following the broad guidelines of the University Grants Commission (UGC) in 2016. Based on the recommendation of experts and industry professionals , a judicious mix of Skill courses with both the theoretical and practical (hands-on-learning) component along with the general educational components with emphasis on developing soft skills and the 21st century skills were given due importance within the programme structure. Thus, the BVoc curriculum developed and offered in the University took care of the theoretical understanding, the practical hands-on-learning, the development of the broader perspectives and general ability of the students with a very strong industry connect through the mandatory industry internship/On-the Job training every semester. Furthermore, the AUD while developing the curriculum in 2016-17 ensured that courses are designed and developed in learning outcome based curriculum mode with an emphasis on the ability of students to perform and practice those learning they have received from the respective course. This was much before the launch of learning outcome based curriculum framework in 2020.

Students and teachers shared their experience about the BVoc curriculum (Fig. 13). Both considered job-relevance of the curriculum (responded by 23% students and 29% teachers) to be the best curricular practice of SVS. This was followed by clearly-defined or learning-outcome-based curriculum (both 18%) and balance of theory-praxis (15% students and 12% teachers respectively).
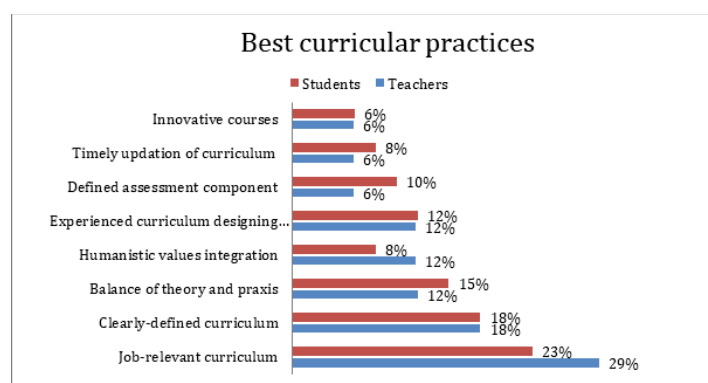

Fig. 13: Best curricular practices

Response code	Students' quotes
R2	"The combinations of courses are unique and offer much of the self-reflections as well personality development."
R11	"In BVoc I like the course outline which very different from a regular BA.
R24	"According to me, This is the programme which is very unique and through this programme we have gained a lot of industrial experience as well, in different companies and hotels, which is the best part. In every semester we have different courses, which makes it even more interesting

The responses indicate that SVS paid utmost attention to make BVoc curriculum comprehensive and contextualised. Teachers and students responses and acknowledgement about the same indicate the success of its delivery or transaction to the end-users. Another teacher mentioned the integration of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) in the teaching and learning process. This includes using tools like presentations, quizzes, audio-video materials, etc., to enhance the effectiveness of instruction and engage students in interactive learning experiences.

Pedagogical practices

Vocational education demands development of skills and competencies among learners. It demands learners to construct knowledge and implement the same in real-world scenario (Lucas et. al, 2012). This indicates that the vocational pedagogy should be different from the general education and should provide a combination of theory and practical skills. Since SVS draws qualified teachers from the industry/sector. They provide learners a chance to directly learn from the practitioners and critically understand the nuances of the market scenarios. This practice also minimises the "dual world of vocational education" where exists a huge gap between practitioners and academicians.

Apart from this, there are many pedagogical practices like faculty using bi-lingual mode of communication or assigning group-work to make teaching-learning process responsive, engaging and inclusive. SVS has drawn extensively from pedagogical practices of AUD like the following:

- *Activity-based:* Keeping in mind the requirements of the vocational education the pedagogy adopted in the Pedagogical practices are mostly activity based learning. Practical sessions and hands on activities were designed and adopted to transact the courses.
- *Reflective:* Students are encouraged to reflect and be critical about their own learning and their surroundings and the society at large.
- *Experiential learning:* Focus is also given on experiential learning so that students can also share and learn from their own previous experiences and the experiences of their peers and teachers.
- **Case studies:** The pedagogy also involves introducing students to engage with some of the case studies. This is done to provide students with real stories and is made aware of the ground realities.
- **Use of ICT:** The faculty also uses the ICT while delivering their sessions to make it more interesting during the Pedagogical practices.
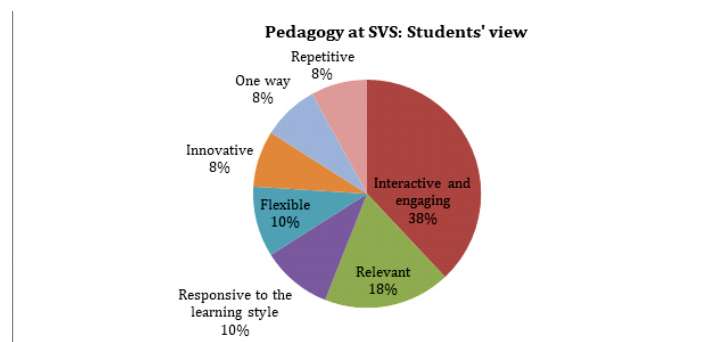

Fig. 14: Pedagogy at SVS: Student's view

The pedagogical practices provide support to the students coming from the diverse background and they acknowledge the same as shown in Fig. 14. Thirty-eight per cent students believe SVS pedagogy to be interactive and engaging. It was followed by relevant (18%) and responsive to the learning style of learners (10%). Some of the students' responses about SVS pedagogy are given below.

Response code	Students' quotes
R3	"According to me the pedagogy they have adopted in BVoc programme is good and innovative."
R14	"No doubt the teachers are highly educated along with being well versed in their own area of expertise."
R22	"The pedagogy adopted by teachers was flexible, if student faces any problem in understanding or learning, faculty tries to their best out of it."

David Perkins (2009) in his book "Making Learning Whole" gave seven principles of teaching which can be suitable for vocational education. He mentions that the learners should be introduced to the 'whole game' rather than the 'parts'.

Considering his typology, emphasis in vocational education should be on skill development, knowledge construction, reflection and constructive feedback by engaging learning in learning by doing. The SVS pedagogical activity also shows a similar picture as shared by teachers and students. The teachers (4 percent) mentioned that the best practices in BVoc programs at SVS include interactive, practical, and experiential teaching and learning approaches. These approaches involve active student engagement and hands-on learning experiences to enhance their understanding and skills.

In terms of teaching-learning methods, classroom discussions (14%), hands-on activities (14%) and Group-work assignments are mostly appreciated by the students. This indicates that SVS pays attention to the needs of learners and tries to balance out the teaching-learning method to suit learners as well as the content. Reflective exercises (11%) are also praised by the students which can be considered rare in vocational or skill training institutes. This method can be attribute to AUD's general pedagogical discourse.
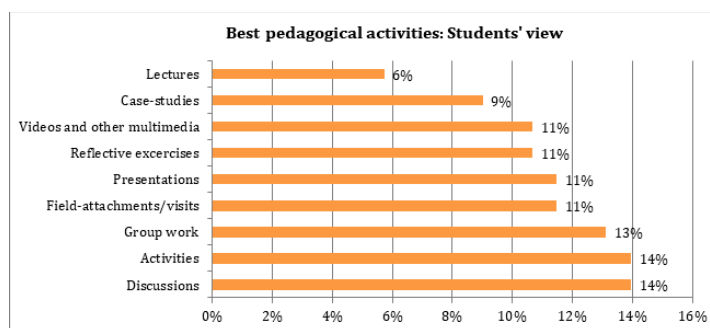

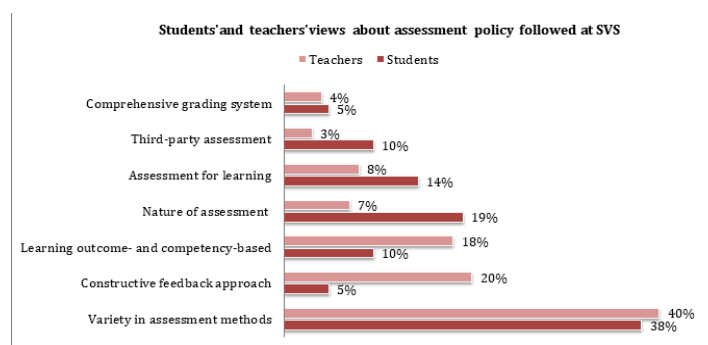**Fig. 15: Best pedagogical activities: Student's view**

Fig. 16: Students' and teachers' views about assessment policy followed at SVS

Assessment Practices

The University adopted a continuous and comprehensive assessment policy at the time of inception and the same is followed till present. The students at AUD does not undergo into exam fear or undue pressure of assessment. Rather the students are assessed all through the semester/session of their study. The assessment situations are left to the faculty to choose from the variety of them. It may have pen-paper assessment, home assignment/project/ case study/ presentation/ mid-semester test/ end semester assessment/exams. Some of the assessments are done individually or in pairs or small groups.

Assessments can also be submitted through visual presentations by making videos/photographs, etc. Along with University assessment, the SVS also organises the Third Party (external assessment) at every exit level by the concerned Sector Skill Council. This is done to ensure that the industry and concerned Sector Skill Councils are satisfied with the knowledge of the students passing from the BVoc programmes and are certified accordingly.

The students and teachers responses highlights that SVS follows:
- *Variety of assessment methods:* The students and teachers appreciated having a variety of assessment methods, including role play, quizzes, group presentations, projects, interviews, discussions, reflective sessions. This indicates that they find these methods engaging and effective for their learning. Some students mentioned the importance of assessments that simulate real-world situations and involve critical analysis. This suggests that they value assessments that require them to apply their knowledge and skills to practical scenarios.
- *Field-based assignments:* A few students and teachers mentioned the significance of field-based assignments. This suggests that they find value in assignments that involve practical work or hands-on experience outside the classroom.
- *Feedback provided:* Five percent students and twenty percent teachers mentioned the importance of constructing feedback on assessments. This indicates that they value timely and constructive feedback that helps them improve their learning and performance.
- *Nature of assessments:* Seven percent teachers and fourteen percent students mentioned the value of open-ended and formative assessments. This suggests that they appreciate assessments that allow for creativity, critical thinking, and independent expression of ideas.
- *Assessment for learning:* Teachers provide support to students to improve their grades by allowing them redo, giving detailed feedback, bilingual submissions, competency and skill assessment for improvement. These practices allow students to be aware of their learning styles and improve their skills. One student highlighted the importance of assessments being inclusive to their needs. This indicates the need for assessments that consider the diverse learning styles, abilities, and preferences of the students.
- *Component-wise grading:* a few teachers and student mentioned the preference for component-wise grading. This implies that they appreciate having their performance evaluated separately for different components or aspects of the assessment.

University support

Students' learning and success depends on course, curriculum, needs, and goals in a University space. However in addition to this, students' learning also depends on the enabling environment and support provided by the people around. The AUD considers students and teachers wellbeing and support to be of utmost importance. Teachers and students appreciated the following University support mechanism which makes their experience unique and rooted:
- *Teachers as mentors:* nine percent teachers and twenty three percent students appreciated the role of teachers in mentoring them at the University. This highlights that student-teacher shares a close bond with each other and there is no hierarchy. One of the student mentioned '*I miss Teacher A whenever I am in stressful situation, she guided me at my most difficult times*'.
- *Feedback mechanism:* AUD teachers spent a considerable amount of time with students to provide feedback about their assignments. This was appreciated as a supportive mechanism by both students (10%) and teachers (9%)

- **Resources and infrastructure:** availability of resources and infrastructure was highlighted by teachers as well as students. This highlights that the institute ensures that the conducive teaching-learning environment is provided by providing necessary equipment and resources.
- **Democratic environment:** AUD has system of electing representatives for various committees and day-to-day classroom coordination. There are class representative who liaison with the teachers and other staff for various work. Selection to student committees is done democratically which is a principle of AUD.
- **Student welfare scheme:** there are many welfare schemes and reservations for diverse students like scholarships, travel reimbursement, fee waiver, stationary and other support. These schemes are appreciated by both teachers and students as it supports students from marginalised background to participate equitably.
- **Internship and placement support:** internships/OJTs are an integral part of the BVoc programme. Students are allocated sites/industry based on various factors. Students receive stipend from the industry and University also support students by providing them travel reimbursement support or organising exclusive sessions on resume writing, mock interviews and team-building activities. This support is highlighted by both set of respondents.
- **English proficiency courses and mentors:** The University provides special courses and sessions to students to improve their English communication. They are also provided with language buddies with whom they can discuss assignments and work on communication skills. This support was acknowledged by the teachers (20%) as well as students (15%).
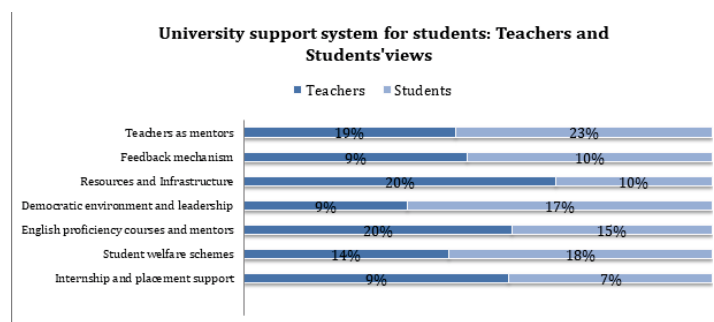

Fig. 17: University support system for students: Teachers and Students' views

Conclusion

The paper exemplifies the best practices of a VET institute situated in a social science University. These key findings are covered under five themes and present a comprehensive picture of practices which any higher education institute can adopt in order to mainstream vocational education and make it more sought after programme. These practices are only a few best practices and the list may be vary from an institute to the other and based on their context.

However, it is also equally important to share here in conclusion that for such practices to be put into practised the School and its core team had to be willing to engage and negotiate with the various challenges it is faced with. A committed and good understanding among the core-team is required and need to be encouraged and supported to sustain the efforts already put.

A smooth channel of networking and communication with all the stakeholders including the industry partners is a must to enhance the quality of the best practices as the programmes offered at the School of Vocational Studies are industry-led programmes. A consorted efforts at coordinating with the various divisions/sections within the University administration is required to make all the stakeholders to be aware and understand the specific requirements and demands of the vocational programmes in a liberal university. It also demands a lot of flexibility and willing to change and adapt to the changing situation on the part of the vocational team and also the University administration to make the vocational programmes relevant and vibrant.

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