NCERT

Aspirations of Undergraduate Students of Vocational Education Programmes: An Exploratory Study at AUD

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Abstract

The flurry of initiatives pertaining to vocational education and skill development by the Government of India offers an interesting insight into the age-old debate around the aims of Higher Education. The two sides of the debate revolve around the questions of whether the aims of Higher Education is to provide a Liberal education or to provide productive skills training; whether the agenda is to develop human consciousness or, to generate human capital. The National Skill Development Agency aims to meet the skilling targets envisioned in the 12th Five Year Plan in order to realize India's Demographic dividend. One of the primary channels through which the key decision-makers hope to meet this is by hastening the spread of Vocational Education in India. Supporting this thrust are structures and provisions such as the National Skill Development Coordination Board, National Skill Development Corporation and the National Skills Qualification Framework, among many others. Given the rigour and importance attached to Vocational Education and skill-based education in present-day India, it makes sense to find out how students enrolled in Higher Education perceive the idea of a vocational and skill-based education today. Using semi-structured interviews with Undergraduate Students and Faculty from SVS, AUD, the paper attempts to gain a better understanding of how the students enrolled in the B.Voc. Programmes at AUD perceive their Programme(s) and what they aspire from it. It explores the question of matches and gaps between the aspirations of students and the provisions of Higher Education. The findings will have implications for pedagogy, aiming to improve awareness, opportunities and participation in vocational and skill- based education.

Keyword: Vocational Education, Higher Education, Education Policy, Skill Development

Introduction

There have been several debates on the aims of Higher Education. Over the last half-century, new pressures have challenged the traditional purpose and civic mission of Higher Education (The National Task Force, 2012). On the one hand, one would argue that the institutes of Higher Education should be aiming for contributions to the commonwealth society i.e., to develop one's "conscience" (Watson, 2014); to cultivate intellect and expand the capacity to reason and to empathise (Levin, 2003). This view associates itself with the historical purposes of Higher Education, best articulated, as cited approvingly even today, in Cardinal Newman's notion of a Liberal education (Mulcahy, 2008). It advocates for education as a form of learning that is an end in itself, directed towards the free exercise of the mind; a vehicle to support the notions of a pluralistic Liberal democracy tied with the modern Liberal values (Shapiro, 2005). However, with the unprecedented changes and concerns of a global and complex society that heralds Neo-Liberal and Globalisation policies (Tilak, 2005; Chandrasekharan, 2011), the other view argues for the purpose of Higher Education to prepare students with new knowledge to meet the workforce needs to

ensure economic prosperity (Sidhu & Jindal, 2006) i.e., to generate skilled people; human capital. This conundrum has posed persistent dilemmas about the purpose and function of Higher Education in the 21st century, especially in countries like India, that aim at building more sophisticated economies by giving priority to Higher Education to produce educated personnel (Altbach, 2009).

Nearly three decades after the onset of economic liberalisation in India, the domestic labour markets' goals are now well aligned with that of the rest of the globe. To meet these needs, institutes of Higher Education have started to revamp their orientations in order to equip all students with the desired attributes and capabilities that contribute to the Global Economy (Tilak, 2005). Statistically speaking, the Fourth Annual Employment and Unemployment Survey (Labour Bureau, 2015) conducted by the Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of India states that the labour force participation rate (LFPR) is estimated at 49% for the age group 18-29 years old based on Usual principal status approach at All India level. While the unemployment rate for this category is estimated at 12.9%, the rate is much higher for graduates (14%) than for 'not literate' and 'below primary' persons (less than 2% each) (Labour Bureau, 2015).

This tension between College graduates and the Market has been well recognised in the policy circles of India. The recognition is further acted upon by several initiatives that began under the National Policy on Skill Development (NPSD) in 2009 (Aggarwal, Kapur & Tognatta, 2012). While works by McKinsey & Company (2015), Srivastava & Hasan (2015), Murti & Bino (2014) and Mehrotra, Gandhi & Sahoo (2013) have helped us in understanding these tensions and identifying employer requirements, there is little empirical understanding around the aspirations of students vis-a-vis the provisions of Higher Education. It is this lacuna that this paper attempts to address. If institutes of Higher Education and college graduates do not have aligned goals for completing their bachelor's degree, there is likely to be disappointment on both sides. In this context, the study focuses on analysing how the current Bachelor of Vocational Education (B.Voc.) cohort(s) studying at the School of Vocational Studies (SVS) at Ambedkar University Delhi (AUD) perceive their programme(s) and what they aspire to gain from it; on finding out the matches and gaps between their aspirations from the programme and that of the University.

Objectives

The context of SVS at AUD has the potential to bring out interesting insights and underpinnings that surround students' aspirations vis-a-vis the purposes of Higher Education. In attempting to do so, the paper also aims to look at the question of matches and gaps between aspirations of B.Voc. students and the provisions of Higher Education using primary data acquired through semi- structured interviews with Undergraduate Students and Faculty from SVS, AUD.

The three primary objectives of the paper are to explore the following Research Questions:

RQ1: What are the aspirations of students enrolled in the B.Voc. Programme at SVS, AUD?

Rq2: What are the aspirations of Faculty at SVS, AUD?

Rq3: What is the location of SVS in a Liberal University space like AUD?

The findings of this empirical study will have implications for pedagogy, aiming to improve awareness, opportunities and participation in Vocational Education.

Method

To analyse in detail how participants perceive and make sense of things which are happening to them, one requires a flexible data collection instrument. In this paper, since the Researcher is particularly interested in complexity and process, in issues that are personal, and in examining varied truths, the tool of semi-structured interviews sit best. Semi-structured interviews also allow the Researcher and participant to engage in a dialogue whereby initial questions are modified in the light of the participants' responses and the researcher can probe interesting and important areas which arise (Smith, J., & Osborn, M, 2008). Hence, semi-structured interviews were designed for the purpose of this paper to understand the aspirations of students enrolled in B.Voc. Programme vis-a-vis the provisions of Higher Education. Additionally, the responses were also used to address the matches and gaps between both. Lastly, there has also been an attempt to trace the location of SVS in a Liberal University space like AUD.

Semi-structured interview

A semi-structured interview is as an interview technique to obtain descriptions of the life-world of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena (Brinkmann& Kvale, 2015). It helps to gain a detailed picture of the participant's beliefs, perceptions or account of a particular topic - in this case, their Aspirations around Higher Education. The fact that Semi- structured interviews can make better use of knowledge-producing potentials of dialogues by allowing much more leeway for following up on whatever angles are deemed important by the Interviewee helps the Researcher to capture the richness of the themes emerging from the participants' response rather than to reduce the responses to quantitative categories.

Tool

Two tools were used for this paper: Semi-Structured Interview Schedule 1 (SSIS 1) and Semi- Structured Interview Schedule 2 (SSIS 2). SSIS 1 was used with Student Participants, and SSIS 2 was used with Faculty participants.

Process

Since the key goal of the paper is to understand and gather the Aspirations of Students vis-a-vis provisions of University, and to further attempt mapping matches and gaps, two semi-structured interview schedules were constructed. SSIS 1 was taken up with five final-year B.Voc. students. The study focuses on data collected from final year B.Voc. Participants under the assumption that final year students, being at a decisive stage in their educational trajectories, are likely to have better- developed notions of aspirations and interests. SSIS 1 was used with all five Student Participants. SSIS 2 was taken up with the Faculty at SVS, AUD. The aspirations of Faculty were investigated to find out the vision of the people who have designed and run the Programme. Moreover, this set of aspirations would also be instrumental in finding out how aligned or non-aligned their aims and objectives are with that of students and would help the Researcher in finding out whether the aims of Higher Education, (in this case, the B.Voc. Programme at AUD) are being realised. SSIS 2 was used with all the four Faculty Participants.

Key Findings

Aspirations of Students

This section discusses the Aspirations of Undergraduate students enrolled in the B.Voc. Programme at SVS, AUD by presenting the common and recurring themes discovered in the primary data.

The findings emerging from this section directly correspond to the First Research Question of the Researcher: What are the aspirations of Students enrolled in the B.Voc. Programme at SVS, AUD?

4.1.1. Start Own Venture.
4.1.2. Take up Managerial Positions.
4.1.3. Assist Families Financially.
4.1.4. Keep up with Dynamism of Industry.
4.1.5. Increase in Awareness of B.Voc. Programme.
4.1.6. Widen the Scope of B.Voc. Programme.
4.1.7. Reduce Course-Work in B.Voc. programme.
4.1.8. Tend to the Market in a more Humanistic fashion.

Aspirations of Faculty

This section discusses the aspirations of Faculty at SVS, AUD by presenting the common and recurring themes discovered in the primary data. The findings emerging from this section directly correspond to the Second Research Question of the Researcher: What are the aspirations of Faculty at SVS, AUD?

4.2.1. Reach out to Larger Community.
4.2.2. Bridge Gap between University Students and Industry.
4.2.3. Mould Students into being Entrepreneurial and Employable.
4.2.4. Vocationalise Education.
4.2.5. Create Conscious and Enlightened Working Professionals.
4.2.6. Alter people's orientation towards Vocational Education.

Matches and Gaps

Utilising the answers to RQ1 and RQ2, the paper attempts to trace matches and gaps between the aspirations of students and the provisions of Higher education. This was done during the analysis of the transcripts and notes of semi-structured interviews from all participants (both students and faculties).

Matches

The matches between the student aspirations and provisions of Higher Education are presented in Table 11 below.

Table 11: Matches between the aspirations of students and provisions of Higher Education

Student aspirations	Faculty aspirations/Provisions of Higher Ed.
To start their own venture.	Imbibe an entrepreneurial spirit in students. Equip them well enough to employ others.
A Managerial job at a reputed Company.	Get students employment.
Earn well in order to contribute to the Family.	Reach out to the marginalised sections, and in that way, serve the larger community.
Address the Dynamism and Demand of the industry.	Bridge the gap between University students and Industry.
Increase Awareness of Programmes like B.Voc. within the Industry and Public.	Change people's orientation towards Vocational Education.
Tend to the Market in a more humanistic fashion; Develop a space for emotions and humaneness in the realm of industries.	Create working professionals who are conscious and enlightened citizens with a critical bent of mind.

Gaps

The gaps in students' aspirations: Gaps in the student aspirations are presented in Table 12 below. The responses from faculty about the same is listed on the right column.

Table 12: Gaps in student aspirations

Student aspirations	Faculty responses
Widen the scope of the Programme; design in a way that would open up more avenues after Graduation; Too industry-based.	The course designed to target areas where there is need for skilled workforce; course is aimed at equipping students for Service-based industry.
Reduce the course-work/ load	30 credits completion is a requirement of UGC.

Gaps in the provisions of Higher Education

The gaps in Faculty aspirations are listed below in Table 13. The reason as to why is listed on the right-hand side of the column.

Table 13: Gaps in Faculty aspirations

Faculty aspirations/ Provisions of Higher Education	Comment
Vocationalise education; Target areas where there is a need for skilled workforce.	Premature to say if this target has been achieved since the first-batch of the Programme is yet to graduate and join the Industry as employers and employees.

Location of SVS in a Liberal space like AUD

The second part of the study looks at how the SVS, a Vocational school, is located within a space like AUD, which is primarily a Liberal Social Science University with MBA and Vocational studies as exceptions. The responses have been derived and interpreted from the interview transcriptions and notes of all 9 participants [both students and faculties]. The purpose of this was to trace and understand if the experiences of the B.Voc. cadre is disparate and diverse or, is alike and resembling that of their fellow students and faculties from the Liberal Arts streams. As in the case of the previous two RQs, the most common and recurring themes that indicate an experience too disparate or too alike have been taken into account in this section of Findings.

The common and recurring themes are as follows:
4.4.1. Feeling of Isolation
4.4.2. Tension between the Dual-Orientations of School (SVS) and the University (AUD)
4.4.3. Tenuous Administrative Work

Discussion and Implications

Vocational Education has gained importance in India over the last two decades. The spurt of initiatives around it came in response to a number factors as recalled in chapter 1- such as demographic shifts, unemployment amongst youth, especially graduates, and skill shortages in the labour market. In light of this expansion, there is a lack of empirical studies around how the students enrolled in Vocational Education Programmes experience and perceive the provisions that are inducted in Higher Education.

The paper addresses this fundamental question. The chapter begins with a discussion highlighting the importance of key findings on lived experiences and aspirations in relation to the structure of B.Voc. at AUD. It does so in line with the Research Questions that guide the paper and presents the implications that come out from these findings.

The paper is focused on examining the aspirations of students enrolled in the B.Voc. Programme at AUD. For the scope of this paper, the Researcher attempted to engage with questions around aspirations of Students and provisions of Higher Education, and traced matches and gaps between both, to gain an understanding of how the provisions have played out for the people who experience it. The paper also extends to examine the location of the Vocational Education cadre in a Liberal University space.

First, the paper presents the 8 most recurring aspirations of students who are currently enrolled in the B.Voc. Programme at SVS, AUD. The findings, which are presented in the form of themes in chapter 4, are vital to understanding what the current cohort of college graduates pursuing a Vocational Education demand from Universities. Aspirations such as wanting to keep up with the Dynamism of the Industry, Increasing the Awareness of B.Voc. Programmes and wanting to tend to the market in a more humanistic fashion inform that the students are not just passive recipients of what is being delivered and demanded by the University and the Market. They are active agents with a voice and a sense of purpose.

Second, the aspirations of Faculty shed light into how the macro structures and provisions that support the thrust of expansion of Vocational Education play out in University micro-spaces. The findings are very much in consonance with the rationale presented at policy levels. The fact that one who votes policies into law are not the ones who assume responsibility for making the policies work in the social context remains one of the biggest challenges of educational practitioners and institutions in and across spaces. An analysis of the aspirations of Faculty, thus, will enable and encourage discussion, alteration and enhancement in future endeavours regarding educational pursuits.

It is worth noting that out of the 8 aspirations that were most recurring and common among student participants, 6 aspirations match with the provisions and Vision of the School and University. This, in alignment with RQs 1 and 2 signifies that largely there is an alignment between the aims and objectives of Undergraduate students and the School and University. This match in aspirations enhances the scope of this paper and presents what made it through different levels of transfer and implementation, and what did not. As important as it is to applaud the matches, the 2 gaps in aspirations of Students, and 1 gap in aspirations of Faculty pose implications for re-thinking some structures and provisions and mould it in a way to turn these gaps into connections.

Lastly, the findings on the location of a Vocational School in a Liberal University space have presented some challenges than narratives of semblance. All 3 findings- Feeling of Isolation, Dual Orientations, and Tenuous Administrative Workload, surround how the Vocational School's location in a Liberal University space has proved to remain testing and taxing. Though there have been tremendous efforts by the School to not pull itself into silos by proactively finding ways to imagine and locate interfaces with the Liberal Programmes offered at AUD, the very nature and structure of the Programme at times causes friction in doing so. However, with the ever-increasing call for 'vocationalisation' of education across several policy documents and programmes, with provisions and recommendations to integrate vocational education with general education, SVS and AUD serve as pioneers in this educational and skill development pursuit taken upon by the policy circles of our country. The findings then can help illustrate the dynamics, ethos and culture of an Educational space with multiple orientations, and in doing that, enable SVS to become a

leader in Vocational Education in the coming years. Though currently there are some gaps that need to be bridged and overcome, the enthusiasm and commitment of the School, as well as the University in augmenting a semblance between Vocational Education and General Education that they had envisioned back in 2017, are to bear fruits. The foresightedness of the people involved in designing the programme, with aspirations and goals that move beyond the conventional and limited imagination for Vocational Stream- by reinterpreting it as a cutting edge and professionally empowering space for students, is to be appreciated and modelled across educational institutions.

The Researcher concludes by recommending some areas that are worth exploring for the scope of future research in this domain. Other than having further implications for pedagogy, aiming to improve awareness, opportunities and participation, the exploration of student aspirations in relation to Vocational Education can enable inquiries into the following themes-

- Role of students in shaping, negotiating and navigating through their Educational pursuits and Aspirations.
- The convergences and divergences between students' Personal and Professional Aspirations.
- The inter-linkages between Educational Aspirations and Social-mobility among students.

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