

Consolidated Response

Online Discussion Forum on Education and Skills Training to Improve the Employability of Young People
July 13 – 27, 2009

Introduction

One billion people around the world will come of working age within the next decade. Many will not enter the workforce by choice. An important portion of them will want employment; a significant number of them will need to work. But not everyone will find a job in their home country. Not everyone who looks abroad will find it either.

This “demographic youth bulge” has created an employment crisis.

Complicating the situation is the ongoing struggle in countries to achieve universal quality education. Although enrolments have increased through secondary school, there remains a large proportion of the future working-age population who are not being fully educated – if at all.

Around 75 million primary school-aged children in the world aren't in school – learning skills and gaining experience to contribute to the opportunities of their future. More than half of them (55 per cent) are girls. In South Asia in 2009, 18.2 million children were out of school, of which nearly 11 million were girls. In East Asia and the Pacific, some 9.5 million children were not in school (4.6 million of them were girls).

Of those who go to school, many drop out before they master basic reading, writing and math skills. In half of the developing countries, around one-fifth of primary school students don't finish their final primary year. In some countries in the Asia and Pacific region, that proportion reaches 40 per cent. At the secondary school level, gross enrolment rates are 51 per cent in South Asia and 75 per cent in East Asia and the Pacific. Among and within countries in the region, these rates vary greatly and substantial disparities are evident: by region, socio-economic class and sex. Regionally, for example, significant gender disparities exist in the enrolment rates in South Asia – to the disadvantage of boys.¹

Among the students who enrol in secondary education throughout the region, few are pursuing pathways into technical and vocational training (TVET). The TVET systems in some countries struggle with the problem of ineffective curriculum, weak teaching skills, a shortage of qualified training instructors, outdated training equipment and inadequate links between training providers and the private-sector demand for skilled labour.

With the effects of the global financial crisis placing further importance on employable skills in a contracting labour market, the education system should respond – particularly at a time when resources are stretched tightly and budgets are shrinking.

¹ UNESCO, 2009, *Education for All global monitoring report*, Paris.



Summary of the E-Forum Discussion

Unemployment and underemployment of both skilled and unskilled workforce members is not a new problem. But it is an expanding predicament as technology and jobs evolve and education and technical training fail to keep pace and as millions of young people are disadvantaged from opportunity because they have not been properly educated or trained – due to poor-quality teaching or because of disparities that have kept them from remaining in school, such as gender, socio-economic status, location (urban/rural) or disability.

In some countries, primary education fails to prepare students for entry into training institutions; the transition rate to secondary or technical training schools is low. The secondary net enrolment rates in Indonesia, Philippines and Viet Nam, for example, are only around 60 per cent; in Malaysia and Thailand, it is slightly better with net enrolment around 70 per cent. But few of the students who do enrol in secondary education in those countries seek out technical and vocational training.

With support programmes pushing for training, the public and private sectors in many countries have made substantial investment to prepare young workers with skills – but often for jobs that don't exist or that don't match the wage or self-employment opportunities in the labour market. In Indonesia, for example, a 2007 survey found that 70 per cent of the young respondents were not using in their current jobs the skills they acquired through their education or training. In other countries, the private sector is unwilling or reluctant (lack of incentive) to invest or involve in skills training.

Challenges to the realm of the TVET system include poorly skilled teachers/facilitators (they are academically and theoretically sound but have a very low orientation of market demand and interests), ineffective, inflexible and outdated curriculum, outdated training equipment and lack of coordination among different ministries and relevant service providers. Competency standards and national qualifications frameworks have yet to be established in some developing countries or may not be tailored to the requirements of the local labour market. Too often there is little or no communication between ministries of labour or education and between training providers and employers. Fees and associated costs and limited space deny many students access to technical training. As well, young students and job seekers lack information on what skills are in demand or where to find prospective employers.

In looking at how youth can be empowered and how their employment opportunities can be improved, five recurring themes emerged in the e-forum's discussions: relevance, quality, access, communication and information. Those challenges have both policy and practical dimensions. The bureaucracy and legislative process can impede the public response. But if the private sector fills the void, what are the implications for equitable access to all?

Considering that 60 per cent of the region's workforce is engaged in the informal sector, cost-effective traditional skills training schemes or other relevant approaches to informal skills training are likely to be more relevant starting points for some countries. The e-forum's discussion underscored the need for public-private and inter-ministerial collaboration as well as alternative training options, such as apprenticeships, better self-employment preparation and the role of non-government organizations as providers of education and training.

Synthesis of the E-Forum Discussions

Question No. 1: How can education and training systems be better matched to labour-market demand?

Conclusions: Skills mismatch is a persistent and possibly lethal challenge throughout the region, with social unrest brewing close to the surface in some countries as the unemployed ranks swell and linger. Certainly accessible, relevant and quality education to all, even in the earliest years of schooling (at the primary level in order for students to ultimately be properly prepared for access to technical and vocational programmes), is a critical first requisite towards skills training, higher education and ultimately productive employment. But such standards are easier said than done, with the “softer” interventions of targeted courses, curriculum reform and comprehensive teacher training taking lower priority compared to building more schools and increasing enrolments.



The role of private sector training can fill a void, but even the instruction offered in such institutions does not always respond to the labour demands. In too many instances, there is substantial public and private investment in the training of young people for jobs that are not there. Judging by the e-forum’s responses, a two-way path of flexibility, communication and information between education and training systems and the labour industry is necessary to contain the skills mismatch problem. This would enable a greater role for employers in the reviewing, reforming and designing of curricula that aims to be relevant and capable of evolving with the market demands. A review of training emphasis may also be in order, with far more importance than ever before placed on entrepreneurialism among young people.

In addition to ongoing issues, participants in the discussion forum also spotlighted some practices that respond to the issue of skills mismatch and employability:

Public sector

- In its first-ever employment policy, the Bangladesh Government recently emphasized youth employment and jobs for 4 million youths by making US\$20 billion available for a “national service” scheme; it is asking private banks to offer employment projects for youth and micro-credit institutions to reduce their interest rates and some other requirements to make livelihood loans more accessible to youth; and it is reforming its TVET system to improve the flexibility, quality, relevance, trainers’ skills and access to “underprivileged” groups. The TVET system will include community-based training, recognition of prior learning, improved apprenticeships and will be expanded for working children, women and people with low education levels. The Bangladesh Technical Education Board (within the Ministry of Education) approved 53 basic courses for accreditation that respond to local and international market demands, and reforms will be based on that list. NGOs and private institutions will conduct the trainings. The new education policy recommends primary education up to grade 8, and technical and vocational education will be introduced from grade 6.
- The governments of Vanuatu and Kiribati have developed national action plans on youth employment that emphasize education and skills training that are in line with international standards.
- The Business Expansion and Retention (BEAR) Programme involves the use of a structured interview questionnaire methodology administered by local community members and educators to gain insights from local business owners and operators about specific labour market needs and

requirements. The questionnaire's value is the way it brings about dialogue between education and training institutions and their business communities.

Private sector

- Wipro, an information technology (IT) outsourcing firm, provides grants for research scholarships and sabbaticals for teachers in engineering school to upgrade their skills; Wipro's motivation is not philanthropy but a lifeline to prevent the potential crippling of the IT industry due to a skilled labour shortage due to the poor quality of teachers.
- In the Solomon Islands, university graduates unable to find employment have set up their own training enterprises. For example, a young woman who studied hospitality business management in Australia but could not find a job for her skills opened a hospitality management training centre. The Ministry of Tourism has outsourced all hospitality management training services to her centre.
- Also in the Solomon Islands, the Chamber of Commerce will set up a private company, managed by trained youths, called "HELP" – Honiara Emergency Labour Pool – to connect companies and job-seeking youth who do not know how to get in touch with potential employers. Youths will register their skills on a roster.

Public-private partnerships

- Entra 21 (sponsored by the International Youth Foundation in Latin America and the Caribbean) is an example of an NGO fostering public-private partnerships; Entre 21 is an ICT training programme that works in conjunction with employers. The participants engage in internships and cultivate usable skills.

Question No. 2: How can we ensure rights to equality in education and employment are upheld for all young people, regardless of gender, socio-economic status, location (urban/rural) and other disparities?

Conclusions: Countries in the region grapple with poor transition rates from primary to secondary or technical training schools. The lack of physical place or accommodation for disabilities as well as socio-cultural attitudes (including gender disparities) push many children out of the school or technical training systems and compromises their future employment prospects. However, it is not easy to increase funding, increase the supply of teachers, update courses, build infrastructure and provide services to all groups in a community. While touching on policy and reforms to overcome disparities and inequalities in access to quality education, the discussion forum's participants more often veered towards creative responses in teaching skills that lead to quality employment opportunities (with one participant opining that the "goal" of education should be "employability"):

Public sector

- Vanuatu's Ministry of Education recently made policy commitments that education will soon be free for all. Until then, some schools accept fee payment not in cash but in items of traditional and cultural wealth, such as tusker pigs, mats and kava plants.
- The Indian Parliament has just agreed to provide universal, free and compulsory education for all children aged between 6 and 14.

Private sector or civil society

- The Training for Rural Economic Empowerment (TREE) methodology incorporates skills training with small business forecasting techniques and has an alternative system for providing

finance (through community resources) for small enterprise creation by encouraging a “community economic system”.

- Open Technologies solutions (http://css.escwa.org.lb/ICTD/17-2_19-2/24.pdf) offers reusable (and free) training materials and software. It is ICT specific, so it may not be directly applicable to the informal sector. It does provide ways to lower costs by removing artificial restrictions on training materials and insight on how the training can be applied.
- Alternative (on-the-job-training) initiatives need to be more valued in terms of national labour market policies, such as the **KOTO Restaurant and Vocational Training Program** in Viet Nam, which provides street children with access to hospitality training and meaningful job placement (www.koto.com.au); **Artisans d'Angkor** in Cambodia is a successful art and craft training and production company that helps disadvantaged rural young people find work in their home villages by making traditional Khmer crafts (www.artisansdangkor.com); and **Centro Treino Integral e Desenvolvimento**, a skills training centre for poor rural young women from all 13 districts of East Timor, offers a live-in, ten-month course teaching a variety of employment and personal development skills for opportunities within villages (many of the women pay in kind for their board and tuition).
- The Lanka Software Foundation in Sri Lanka (<http://www.opensource.lk/>) sponsors a mentor from a local or foreign software company to work on specific projects with universities. The outputs of these projects, due to open-source licensing, can be reused by the company of the mentor and at the same time, university students learn and apply real-world skills and practices in their projects. One of the most successful outputs is the Sahana Disaster Management software (<http://www.sahana.lk/>), but the students are also heavily involved with the Apache Software Foundation (<http://www.apache.org/> projects), which also creates products used by large companies around the world.

In Bangladesh, the Underprivileged Children's Educational Program is one of the first NGO providers to guarantee job placement for all its skills training graduates, such as with SINGER. Students interested in starting their own business or shop can take training courses on entrepreneurship. Assistance is also provided in applying for micro or small loans from NGOs and other financial institutions.



Public-private partnerships

- In partnership with the Workers Employers Bilateral Council of Pakistan, the Government of Pakistan established five skills development councils to provide quality training, particularly for women. A National Technical and Vocational Training Commission was established under the chairmanship of the prime minister with the sole objective of enhancing and supplementing training facilities and addressing disparities.
- To complement the provincial government-owned vocational training centre, local small business owners and master craftspeople were recruited as apprenticeship training providers in fishing communities in Sihanouk Ville and Kampot, Cambodia. That programme is included in an ILO-IPEC publication, *Consolidated Good Practices in Education and Child Labour*, in a section dealing with skills training and employment-related approaches (http://www.ilo.org/global/What_we_do/Publications/ILOBookstore/Orderonline/Books/lang--en/WCMS_091354/index.htm).

Concluding Analysis

There are two strongly compelling challenges to youth employability in Asia and the Pacific: 1) The woeful inadequacy of skills and jobs that match skills (or skills that match jobs) and 2) equitable access to quality education, from the primary level through higher institutions of learning or technical and vocational training.

The e-forum's discussion on empowering youth and creating more opportunities to improve their employability involved a back and forth between responding to the supply-side and the demand side issues. Many questions arose with few answers: How much does the problem actually lie within the supply of labour and how much with the demand? How much would a better and optimal supply help to solve the issue of youth employment? What exactly should be the role of the State?

But as one participant pointed out: Is it possible that government education and training systems are trying to do too much? Is a better option for the governments in developing countries to focus only on two things: 1) providing basic employability skills to young people, ensuring that services are provided to disadvantaged groups throughout the country; and 2) providing support industry to improve training that is provided in the workplace? For developing countries, this approach would mean that the government sector would need to significantly reduce its efforts in trying to meet the training needs of industry and instead focus on providing basic capabilities, such as workplace or employability skills including literacy and numeracy.

And yet, as other participants noted, information and communications technology (ICT) skills are now in a great demand and relevant in the field of youth education and skills training.

Certainly improving the quality of education and training is a key priority for most governments in the region. Given the current economic situation, education and training – more than ever – need to be relevant, of good quality and accessible to all. In the back and forth e-forum discussion, the following recommendations surfaced on better matching education and training to labour-market demand:

- Vocational training should be preparing youth graduates to be leaders in entrepreneurship and self-employment by emphasizing business management as well as technical skills.
- Establish a good link between skilled youth and potential sources of employment, such as through youth employment centres, counselling and mentoring offices where young people can find information or be put in touch with employment opportunities.
- Countries with a strong achievement in basic education that are approaching or are in the middle stages of economic development should aim to improve the quality of and participation in secondary education as well as TVET. For students who do enrol in secondary education in these countries, few are pursuing pathways into technical and vocational training.
- Labour and education ministries should engage in regular dialogue to respond to the skills mismatch dynamic.
- Public–private partnerships can respond to the skills mismatch and skills gaps issues.

In Asia and the Pacific there remain significant differences between the educational and employment opportunities of the rich and poor and boys and girls/men and women. With gender disparities prevalent beyond education – with female representation low in governments and females remaining discriminated

against in wages and high-value jobs – how can opportunity be effectively strengthened for women? Participants in the e-forum discussion offered the following recommendations in response to the question on ensuring equality in education and employment for all young people:

- To ensure access to education courses and training programmes for marginalized and disadvantaged youth, consider flexible admission criteria, flexible classroom timing and more diversified courses, prior learning recognition and informal apprenticeships and income compensation for attendance at schools or in training courses.
- Consider public–private–NGO partnerships in education and training, which is now happening on an increasing scale in many countries. Maintain links between the training providers and employers and provide effective post-training support and follow-up services.
- Open and shared ICT development provides any undergraduate with an internet connection and any computer to gain experience working on the largest software projects in the world and an opportunity to work and learn from leading engineers from Google, IBM, HP and others. Google Summer of Code even pays students US\$3,000 (<http://code.google.com/soc/>).
- Open the provision or management of IT services in universities to students instead of outsourcing to IT companies. They could be mentored by seniors and report to an IT manager. Students learn both technical and management skills in having to deal with real problems on tight budgets and in line with users’ expectations.
- Consider conditional cash transfers for poor and vulnerable groups.
- To streamline and improve the formal and informal apprenticeship systems, training regulatory authorities have to take a proactive role and develop a monitoring mechanism for both types, periodically monitor working conditions and wages and evaluate the skill levels of the apprentices; if need be, short training opportunities should be provided to the apprentices in formal institutions for subsequent testing and certification. In some cases, incentives to employers might be the option for ensuring effective and non-exploitative apprenticeships, particularly in the informal economy.
- A school-to-work transition survey would be useful to counter the lack of labour market data.
- An evaluation of a skills training programme for disadvantaged youth in Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Philippines recommends the practice of having children learn skills through apprenticeship with local business owners (although protected from exploitation). Career counselling or career guidance should be provided to children before the selection of courses, and the selection of skills should be based on the children’s ages and development stages and can be combined with literacy and numeracy training. More attention should be paid to rural-oriented skills that can be learned in the community. All initiatives need to adopt a system for measuring and evaluating, include qualitative dimensions and have continued follow-up studies. Support services should include tracer studies, labour market surveys and the provision of seed money or loans.

It is envisaged that the APYN community will use these recommendations in their programme work and planning as we are all here to improve the employability of young people.

Discussion Statistics

Number of subscribed members: 40

- ILO: 24
- Non-ILO: 16
- Male: 25
- Female: 15

Number of exchanges

- Week 1: 14
- Week 2: 15

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