

Indexed Journal
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Online ISSN: 3107-8443

Volume: 1

Issue: 2

Year: 2025

International Journal of Applied Review

Royal Publications

C-11, 169, Sector-3

Rohini, Delhi-110085, India



International Journal of Applied Review

Indexed Journal, Refereed Journal, Peer Reviewed Journal

Online ISSN: 3107-8443

Publication Certificate

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Details of Published Article as follow:

Volume : 1
Issue : 2
Year : 2025
Page Number : 206-209
Reference No. : 1040
Published Date : 25 Dec, 2025
Impact Factor. : RJIF-8



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Indexed Journal, Refereed Journal, Peer Reviewed Journal

Online ISSN: 3107-8443

Publication Certificate

This certificate confirms that **Dr. Priyanka Sambhaji Jadhavar** has published article titled **Vocational education, skill development, and lifelong learning in India: From workforce preparation to the vision of a learning society.**

Details of Published Article as follow:

Volume : 1
Issue : 2
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Page Number : 206-209
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Vocational education, skill development, and lifelong learning in India: From workforce preparation to the vision of a learning society

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Abstract

Vocational education and skill development have assumed strategic importance in India's development discourse due to rapid technological change, labor market transformation, and the need for inclusive economic growth. Traditional education systems, largely oriented toward academic credentials, have proven insufficient in preparing learners for employability, entrepreneurship, and continuous adaptation. This research paper examines the concept, scope, policies, and programmes of vocational education and skill development in India, with particular attention to market requirements and the prevailing skilling status of the workforce.

The study analyzes how vocational education is operationalized through adult education, continuing education, and lifelong learning frameworks, focusing on state-supported structures such as Jan Shikshan Sansthan and non-state initiatives led by industrial and business houses. It explores the emergence of micro-enterprises, especially Self-Help Groups, and mega-level collective enterprises such as the Self-Employed Women's Association, which demonstrate skill-based, inclusive economic models. The paper critically evaluates the Skilling India framework, including skill sectors, the National Skill Development Policy, implementation mechanisms, certification systems, and equivalence structures. It further examines entrepreneurship-oriented initiatives such as Make in India, Start-up India, Stand-Up India, and MUDRA, analyzing their impact at both micro and mega levels. Beyond employability, the paper advances a futuristic vision of lifelong learning that transcends literacy and numeracy. It addresses the dilemmas of institutional and non-institutional learning, emphasizes localization of learning within cultural contexts, and advocates personalized, network-based, and open learning models. The paper argues that India's long-term development depends on evolving educational policies that promote flexibility, equity, and continuous learning, ultimately leading toward a learning society.

Keywords: Vocational education, skill development, lifelong learning, adult education, employability, Skilling India, Jan Shikshan sansthan, self help groups, SEWA, entrepreneurship, informal learning, certification and equivalence, learning society, workforce development, educational policy

Introduction

India's economic and social transformation in the twenty-first century is closely linked to its capacity to develop a skilled, adaptable, and continuously learning workforce. While the country possesses a vast demographic advantage, this potential is undermined by structural unemployment, underemployment, and a persistent mismatch between educational qualifications and labor market requirements. Formal education systems have traditionally emphasized degrees and theoretical knowledge, often neglecting practical skills, vocational competencies, and lifelong learning capabilities. Vocational education and skill development have therefore emerged as essential policy priorities. These are no longer viewed merely as alternatives for those unable to pursue higher education, but as central components of human capital development, employability, entrepreneurship, and social inclusion. Simultaneously, the concept of lifelong learning has gained prominence, redefining education as a continuous process extending across the life span and across formal, non-formal, and informal contexts.

This paper provides a comprehensive analysis of vocational education, skill development, and lifelong learning in India. It integrates policy frameworks, institutional mechanisms, and socio-economic outcomes to demonstrate how skill development can contribute not only to economic

productivity but also to empowerment, equity, and the creation of a learning society.

Concept and Scope of Vocational Education and Skill Development

Vocational education refers to structured educational and training processes designed to equip individuals with occupation-specific skills, technical knowledge, and professional attitudes. Skill development extends this concept by including short-term training, re-skilling, up-skilling, and recognition of skills acquired through informal or experiential learning.

The scope of vocational education in India is broad due to the diversity of the workforce and the dominance of the informal sector. It serves multiple purposes: facilitating school-to-work transitions, supporting adult learners, empowering marginalized communities, and promoting entrepreneurship. Vocational education also contributes to social mobility by providing alternative pathways for those excluded from mainstream academic education.

In the contemporary context, vocational education is increasingly integrated with digital skills, soft skills, problem-solving abilities, and entrepreneurial competencies. This expanded scope aligns vocational education with the philosophy of lifelong learning, emphasizing adaptability rather than static skill acquisition.

Market Requirements and the Skilling Status in India

India's labor market is characterized by rapid sectoral shifts, technological innovation, and globalization. While sectors such as manufacturing, healthcare, logistics, renewable energy, and information technology demand skilled labor, a significant proportion of the workforce remains inadequately trained. Employers frequently report shortages of job-ready workers, while educated unemployment continues to rise. This contradiction reflects systemic weaknesses, including outdated curricula, limited industry–education linkages, insufficient practical training, and fragmented certification systems. Regional and social inequalities further exacerbate the problem, as access to quality skill training remains uneven across urban and rural areas. Addressing market requirements requires a dynamic skilling ecosystem informed by labor market intelligence, sectoral forecasting, and continuous curriculum revision. Skill development must anticipate future employment trends rather than merely responding to existing gaps.

Vocational Education in Adult, Continuing Education, and Lifelong Learning

Adult and continuing education play a crucial role in delivering vocational education to learners outside the formal schooling system. These modes recognize adult learners as autonomous individuals whose learning is shaped by life experience, economic necessity, and social context.

1. State-Supported Structures: Jan Shikshan Sansthan

Jan Shikshan Sansthans (JSS) represent a decentralized model of adult vocational education focused on livelihood skills, functional literacy, and social empowerment. By aligning training with local economic activities, JSS institutions enable learners—particularly women, minorities, and disadvantaged groups—to integrate education with income generation. Their community-based approach strengthens the link between learning and lived realities.

2. Non-State Supported Structures

Industrial and business houses have become significant contributors to skill development through corporate social responsibility initiatives, training academies, and public–private partnerships. These programmes often emphasize industry relevance, technological skills, and immediate employability. While such initiatives enhance efficiency and relevance, concerns remain regarding accessibility, equity, and long-term sustainability.

Emergence of Micro-Enterprises and Mega-Enterprises

Skill development has significantly contributed to the emergence and expansion of micro-enterprises, particularly in the form of Self-Help Groups (SHGs), which represent one of the most effective grassroots models of livelihood generation in India. SHGs typically combine vocational skills training with microfinance, savings, and collective entrepreneurship, enabling economically marginalized individuals—especially women—to participate actively in local economies. Through skill-based activities such as tailoring, food processing, handicrafts, agriculture-related enterprises, and services, SHGs facilitate income generation while simultaneously fostering financial literacy, social solidarity, and decision-making capacities. Their collective structure reduces individual risk, enhances bargaining

power, and promotes inclusive growth, making SHGs a critical instrument for poverty alleviation and women's economic empowerment. At the macro or mega-enterprise level, organizations such as the Self-Employed Women's Association illustrate how vocational education and skill development can be integrated with cooperative principles, labor rights, and social security mechanisms. SEWA operates as both a trade union and a movement for informal sector workers, particularly self-employed women. Its model links skill training with access to credit, healthcare, insurance, childcare, and market networks, thereby addressing the multidimensional vulnerabilities faced by informal workers. Unlike conventional employment paradigms that prioritize wage labor, SEWA's approach emphasizes collective ownership, dignity of labor, and economic self-reliance.

The coexistence of micro-enterprises like SHGs and mega-enterprises like SEWA highlights the scalability of skill-based development models. While SHGs operate at the community level, mega-enterprises institutionalize these principles on a larger scale, influencing policy and advocating structural reforms. Together, they demonstrate that skill development is not merely an employment strategy but a transformative socio-economic process capable of reshaping livelihoods, gender relations, and development pathways.

Skilling India: Policy, Programmes, and Implementation

The Skilling India initiative represents a comprehensive national effort to address India's workforce skill deficit and enhance employability across sectors. Anchored in the National Skill Development Policy, the initiative seeks to create an integrated, demand-driven skill ecosystem by coordinating efforts across central and state governments, private sector actors, and civil society organizations. The policy emphasizes convergence, standardization, and outcome orientation, recognizing skills as a critical driver of economic growth and social inclusion. A key institutional mechanism under Skilling India is the establishment of Sector Skill Councils (SSCs), which play a pivotal role in identifying sector-specific skill requirements, developing National Occupational Standards, and designing competency-based curricula. These councils ensure alignment between training programmes and industry needs, thereby addressing the persistent mismatch between education and employment. The skilling framework prioritizes modular training structures that allow learners to acquire skills incrementally and flexibly, accommodating diverse entry and exit points.

Certification, equivalence, and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) are central to the structure of skilling programmes. These mechanisms legitimize skills acquired through informal and non-formal means, enhance labor mobility, and provide pathways for further education and career advancement. By integrating skill certification with national qualification frameworks, Skilling India seeks to create parity between vocational and formal education. Despite these advancements, implementation challenges remain significant. Uneven training quality, limited monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, regional disparities, and institutional fragmentation undermine the effectiveness of skilling initiatives. Addressing these issues requires stronger governance, continuous curriculum updates, robust quality assurance, and deeper industry engagement to ensure

that skill development translates into sustainable employment outcomes.

Entrepreneurship, Make in India, and Financial Inclusion

Entrepreneurship has emerged as a central pillar of India's skill development strategy, linking vocational training with enterprise creation and financial inclusion. Flagship initiatives such as Make in India, Start-up India, Stand-Up India, and MUDRA collectively aim to foster an entrepreneurial ecosystem that supports innovation, manufacturing growth, and job creation. These programmes integrate skill development with access to credit, mentorship, and institutional support, recognizing entrepreneurship as a viable alternative to wage employment. At the micro level, these initiatives empower first-generation entrepreneurs, particularly youth, women, and marginalized social groups, by reducing entry barriers to business creation. Access to collateral-free loans through MUDRA, targeted support under Stand-Up India, and incubation facilities under Start-up India enable skilled individuals to translate training into productive enterprises. Skill development thus becomes a catalyst for self-employment and local economic development. At the macro level, make in India seeks to enhance manufacturing capacity, attract investment, and generate large-scale employment by aligning skill development with industrial growth strategies. However, the success of these initiatives depends not only on financial support but also on ecosystem development, including market access, regulatory ease, mentoring networks, and continuous skill upgradation. Without sustained learning and institutional support, entrepreneurial ventures risk remaining short-lived. Overall, entrepreneurship-oriented skill initiatives demonstrate the interconnectedness of education, finance, and economic policy. When effectively integrated, they contribute to inclusive growth, employment generation, and long-term economic resilience.

Lifelong Learning: The Futuristic Vision

Lifelong learning represents a transformative educational paradigm that extends far beyond the traditional goals of literacy and numeracy. In contemporary knowledge-based societies, learning increasingly encompasses critical thinking, digital competence, adaptability, creativity, and civic engagement. These competencies enable individuals to respond effectively to rapid technological change, shifting labor markets, and complex social challenges. Lifelong learning reframes education as a continuous, life-wide, and life-deep process, recognizing that learning occurs not only within formal institutions but also across workplaces, communities, families, and digital environments. A central challenge addressed by lifelong learning is the long-standing divide between institutional and non-institutional forms of learning. Formal education systems often privilege standardized curricula and credentials, while undervaluing experiential, informal, and indigenous knowledge systems. Lifelong learning resolves this dilemma by recognizing multiple learning spaces and legitimizing diverse forms of knowledge acquisition. Localization of learning within the cultural, social, and economic context of learners enhances relevance and motivation, particularly for adult learners whose identities and aspirations are shaped by lived experience.

Personalized and customized learning pathways are essential components of this vision. Adult learners differ widely in age, background, prior learning, and career goals; therefore, flexible and learner-centered approaches are critical. Network-based learning models, supported by digital technologies, facilitate collaboration, peer learning, and access to global knowledge resources. Open-option learning systems allow learners to choose learning trajectories aligned with their personal and professional needs. Building learning communities further strengthens lifelong learning by fostering collective knowledge creation, social cohesion, and democratic participation. To sustain this vision, educational policy must remain dynamic and responsive. An ever-evolving policy framework is necessary to integrate innovation, equity, and sustainability, ultimately guiding the transition toward a learning society.

Conclusion

Vocational education, skill development, and lifelong learning together constitute the foundation of India's developmental future in an era marked by economic uncertainty, technological transformation, and social inequality. While significant progress has been made through policy initiatives, institutional reforms, and programme expansion, the true impact of these efforts depends on their effective integration, inclusiveness, and adaptability. Fragmented approaches that treat vocational education, skill development, and lifelong learning as separate domains risk limiting their transformative potential. Embedding vocational education within a comprehensive lifelong learning framework enables individuals to continuously update their skills, adapt to changing labor market demands, and pursue meaningful livelihoods across the life course. Such integration also enhances social inclusion by creating opportunities for marginalized groups, informal workers, women, and adult learners who have historically been excluded from mainstream education systems. By valuing experiential learning and multiple knowledge systems, lifelong learning strengthens democratic participation and social empowerment. From a policy perspective, the transition toward a learning society requires moving beyond short-term employability goals toward long-term human development. This involves aligning education with economic planning, technological innovation, cultural diversity, and social justice. Continuous curriculum renewal, recognition of prior learning, flexible certification pathways, and strong community engagement are essential to this process. Ultimately, a learning society is one in which education is not confined to classrooms or limited to youth, but is accessible throughout life and across social spaces. Such a society places human capabilities, dignity, and well-being at the center of national progress. In this sense, vocational education and lifelong learning are not merely instruments of economic growth but vital foundations for sustainable, inclusive, and democratic development.

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