

Distinguish between knowledge and skill

The past few decades have been a roller coaster ride for businesses/industries and higher education. From early 1980s till the end of the 20th century, the world buzzed about how the affirmative role played by the youth enhanced businesses. During this period India was a country with great advantage because it churned out fresh graduates with sound basic degrees in engineering, ICT and related subjects who were much in demand across the world.

Given the immediate need, the employers did not worry if the graduates had application oriented skill education. They merely looked for fundamental knowledge and trained them in skills needed in their various production processes. Thus the graduates were trained in a focused manner in design and product manufacturing component. They ended up understanding the product and, most often, a part of the whole product that was under production. In effect, they turned out to be trained knowledge-skill-labourers. Graduates did not complain, as they were getting a handsome salaries. The net result was that the workers were happy and the employers were also happy.

However, in 2001 things started changing: the products became more user-oriented and this aspect changed the entire process of design strategy. It also revitalised the production process itself. The industries, as expected, were eager to generate good business and this demanded combined knowledge in fundamental subjects from different disciplines and strong understanding of skills as demanded by the production process.

In a larger perspective what industry was looking for was clear understanding of the link between knowledge and product for global success. These transformations in the expectations from the workers in the industry triggered enormous academic change in universities in advanced countries. But as expected, countries like India are not able to understand the need for change in delivery and scope of education. They failed to understand that the world has changed more in the last one decade. And that the workers these days are not parts of the production process, but the backbone of production and that is why they must be familiar with the global changes.

The west brought in a new dramatic delivery system in universities. First, it has changed the academic structure. It has gone for credit based modular structure wherein module-based teaching is done in fundamental core-subjects, application of the fundamental subjects and effective use of technology for nurturing of integrated information on the knowledge spread of the subjects. This is further enriched with exposure to the need and value of financial transparency on such aspects like mechanics of advertisement, effects of promotion and enhanced distribution of products in different cultures, different countries, and the sociology and psychology of populations' purchasing tendency.

Secondly, the universities have learned the process of creating seamless friendship with businesses and industries. They have started recognising domain-fixed expertise acquired by the senior production managers as well as the administrative officers. They use the term "focused knowledge expert" in their domain of job task.

In a way we are going away from the rigid definition of “recognised teacher” — those who have acquired a PhD. The acceptance of “focused knowledge experts” as legalised component of the university would allow them to teach a module in hands- on way. This open approach is very enlightening. Such a forward looking step of giving academic recognition to ground level production experts in the industries would strengthen the relationship of universities and the workplace. The important entities of knowledge linked economy, namely the academicians, and the industrialists’ would thus become more friendly and supportive of each other.

Thirdly, in past 10 years, western universities have developed a pragmatic approach to the use of technology. For instance, teachers have understood the process of creating lectures for online training and learning. Indeed they are happy with this process, as they can blend teaching process by integrating expertise and knowledge of teachers from other universities in their delivery methods.

In India we have been creating various policy documents in higher education domains. While creating these polices we should not deviate from true relationship between fundamental core education and skill education. If we succeed to strengthen this relationship in a focused manner we would be in a win-win situation.