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'Vocational courses backbone of our education system'

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Switzerland has maintained one of the lowest unemployment rates, even during the recent economic crisis. It also has one of the highest proportions of skilled workers. This is ascribed to their system of vocational education and training. Rudolph H Strahm, one of the pioneers of this system, spoke with Subodh Varma:

What is the Swiss vocational education and training (VET) system?

We call it the dual system because students spend one to one and a half day in classrooms in a college and three to three and a half days in an industrial unit getting hands-on training. There are 243 trades in 22 fields on offer. A tripartite commission consisting of the federal government, the employers' associations and the employees' associations determines the content of these courses. It is periodically reviewed so that the latest technologies are included. Courses last for three to four years. Students are admitted after completing compulsory school at the age of 15. They are guided in their choice by state-run occupational guidance offices. Companies pay them about 800 Swiss francs per month for the duration of apprenticeship.

Are these courses popular?

They are the backbone of our secondary education system. Sixty-three per cent of compulsory school pass-outs enrol in vocational and professional education courses. Only 23 per cent go for academic baccalaureates. Even after completing this secondary stage, about three quarters of students go for higher education in professional colleges or higher VET, with practical training. Almost 90 per cent of the VET and PET passouts get jobs. The average wage a new trained entrant in industry gets is about 5,600 Swiss francs. Some of them continue into the higher vocational or professional education sector. Many existing workers join courses in new trades if they think they are better suited for them.

What is the key to this success?

It is the involvement of employers and the state together in a public-private partnership. There is no law forcing industry to take in apprentices. But they need highly skilled people, especially in new emerging skill areas. The apprentices are trained in these skills and they infuse the mainstream economy with it. Economic analysis shows that productive work by apprentices in the workplaces starts yielding profits to the company from the second year itself. So, it is very beneficial to the industry. Expenditure on education by the state is just like any other advanced country -- in the range of about 6 per cent of GDP. But such a vocational system is unique to us, and our neighbours -- Denmark, Austria, Germany and Holland -- for historical reasons.

India's experience of vocational education has not been very happy. Do you have any suggestions?

I can't recommend any formula, because every country has its own tradition and evolution. But perhaps a better linkage with the needs of industry -- with them taking on some responsibility too -- would help close the gap and ensure better employability of the workers.

Can your system be adapted to a different setting like India?

We ourselves have kept changing the course content over the years according to popularity -- in the 1980s it was banking services and in the 1990s informatics. Since the whole system is closely aligned to industry needs, changes in the macro-economy are speedily reflected in courses and seats. Ours is a service sector-based economy. This is reflected in the vocational courses. The same can be adapted for a more differentiated economy like India's.

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