

Photograph: ANIL DAYAL

THE HEART OF LEARNING

Over half of young students—each mindful of his/her special interests—are opting for courses fit for new-age careers

BY LOLA NAYAR

THEY are young, impatient and, instead of blindly blundering down a path chosen by forebears, know their minds. The trend of youngsters pursuing careers that combine their interests with opportunities to earn gainful employment is on the rise. Together with changing market trends, particularly the digital transition as well as labour requirement, a slow change is being observed in the courses being offered by universities. Introduced over the last couple of years by very mainstream places like Delhi University

and Mumbai University, they are reflective of the varied aspirations of the young or those seeking a change from mundane jobs. Top among vocational courses being offered by government and private varsities is retail management, reflecting the sharp growth in this sector. Other popular courses are healthcare management and IT courses—from basic computer systems to programming and data sciences.

Entrepreneurship being the new buzzword, there are both graduate and post-graduate courses on offer with interesting specialisations. For instance, in Delhi, Ambedkar University offers a post-graduate course in Early Childhood Care and

Education, while Jamia Millia Islamia offers a vocational degree in Solar Energy. These are apart from those offered by the College of Vocational Studies under DU. Last year, the Delhi government launched several short-term vocational courses, the most popular being those catering to the hospitality and retail sectors.

"Lately, several colleges offer vocational courses. The focus on these has gained momentum since last year. As a lot of parents remain wary of sending their children for diploma courses, the UGC has this year made a push to introduce vocational degree courses," says Jitin Chawla of Centre for Career Development.

Unlike India, many countries have a

system of awarding vocational degrees. Australia has, in fact, reorganised its system over the last 15 years to integrate vocational courses with the degree stream. For instance, after a year of education, a student can get a diploma and after three years of education get a degree. This is now being considered in India as part of the national skill development initiative.

Chawla points to the fact that though the CBSE has introduced vocational subjects in schools, like food processing, not many parents allow their children to opt for them, as at the time of admission to undergraduate courses, marks are reportedly reduced from the aggregate when a student has had a vocational subject.



KASHIF MASOOD

At the college level too, most takers for vocational courses are from government schools or from not too well-off families. This is because the government system is not able to attract children from posher socio-economic backgrounds. The apathy is reduced to an extent when the same course is offered at a top private university or college. "Most Indians are not ready to accept their child's desire for doing a vocational programme. An alternative career is still to take root in India. Most students go for it after graduation, when they are better aware and in a position to make informed choices," states Chawla, citing the case of a child who had come for career counselling and voiced

Students at a vocational course class at NIT Hamirpur; below, an IT class in progress

LAYING IT OUT Vocational courses in hospitality is a big draw

the desire to pursue a career in gaming, but was overruled by his parents.

Ironically, though a vast number of youths enter the job market each month, neither the government nor the private sector is focusing adequately on vocational or skill development. While private universities look at courses purely from a placement point of view, in government colleges and universities, any proposed change takes decades to be implemented, says Mohan Tiwari of Students' Destination, a career counselling start-up.

"There is need for more focus on new-age careers, anything apart from STEM (science, technology, engineering and math). So far, everyone has been focusing too much on STEM; going forward, I feel we should have qualifications that are purely vocational," says Tiwari. He is among experts who feel vocational qualifications are in and will remain so for the next 20 years and more, as they are skill-driven qualifications and have a direct correlation with employability.

Breaking cliched career moulds, many children are venturing into fields like carpentry and handicrafts, which were earlier restricted to certain communities. Now, enterprising youngsters with a background in design are visiting villages and towns off the beaten tracks to discover and learn dying art forms and using their formal training to create products in tune with emerging trends. This is helping revive dying arts and crafts, while providing new career opportunities. Some institutions, like the JJ College of Arts, are helping with interesting courses like ceramics, pottery and puppetry.

Many students just out of school and graduating from colleges are no longer just talking about getting any job but becoming writers and pursuing other interesting activities after their hearts. Many go to great lengths to seek information on new opportunities.

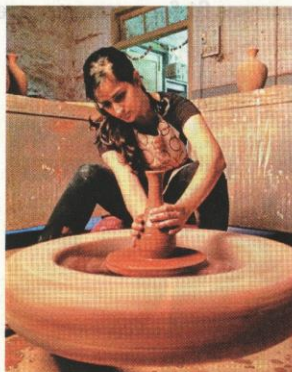
The idea today is to ensure that youngsters are all finding their separate niches, their unique metiers, as it were, as not everyone needs to fit into that old, hackneyed Indian binary—'an engineer or a doctor'. This is increasingly being understood by parents; therefore, career counsellors are striving to make children aware of their strengths, abilities and mindset, as also career opportunities that



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fit those abilities and inclinations.

"Aspirations are not any less among children today, it's just that their career goals may be different. Around 20-25 per cent people want to constantly upgrade themselves to keep ahead of changing trends and market requirements," says Tiwari, an alumnus of IIM Ahmedabad who himself switched to career counselling after 14 years in the corporate world. "Going by data of students coming to us in the last two years, over 50 per cent opt to go to new-age careers, be it shoe designing to film-making, becoming a blogger, a YouTuber, an e-advertiser etc. Everyday, we are talking about a large number of new careers. More than 50 per cent kids are moving away from traditional or conventional careers. That is a huge jump," Tiwari adds.



A student at a pottery class

Whether it be fashion designing or communications management, new trends drive new career opportunities. These are careers that require a continuous upgrading in skills and modes to become a better professional and be able to outshine not just the competition but also oneself.

The need to have an industry-ready workforce is seeing a shift in the way courses are being designed. For instance, NIIT University's BTech in computer science, with emphasis on digital transformation technologies, has been designed to create a new breed of IT engineers sorely needed by the industry. The programme is focused on building a strong foundation in mathematical and algorithmic concepts. Similarly, its MSc programme in computer science is designed to provide students an overview of computing, an understanding of concepts, principles and skills in their application and extension, and a practical experience in applied computing. This redesigning is in keeping with the evolving industry and marketing needs, just like the new certificate and diploma courses in data analytics, cloud management, digital marketing etc being offered by many private universities. Wherever there is user interface, there is a felt need for specialisation. This applies to courses like multimedia and animation, which are greatly in demand.

In all, around 60-70 per cent of people opt for vocational courses after graduation while 30-35 per cent opt to do them after school. Age seems to be no bar for a career switch, going by the number of people opting for new education or specialisation before making the change. Free, bold thinking on careers is here to stay. □