

TeamLease to set up vocational education university in Gujarat

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Staffing company **TeamLease Services Pvt. Ltd** announced on Monday it is setting up a vocational education university in Gujarat to help plug an increasing skill gap in India's labour force.

This comes after the Union government recently announced its intention to set up a national vocational education framework to cater to millions of students who cannot, or do not, take up higher education.

TeamLease has entered into an agreement with the Gujarat government to set up TeamLease University (TLU), comprising 22 community colleges across the state. Though there are several skill training institutes in the country, this will be the first university for vocational education.

"We have a very small vocational training sector in India. Only 5% of students go for vocational training while the number is nearly 80-90% in developed countries," said Pawan Agarwal, a civil servant and author of the book, *Indian Higher Education: Envisioning the Future*. "While a direct comparison doesn't make sense because agriculture is a dominant occupation in India, the difference is still very significant."

While developed countries give a lot of focus to vocational education, a lack of sufficient skilled labour is a major worry in India, the second-fastest growing major economy.

According to data available with the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), the country has around 7,500 technical institutes for higher education and only 2,500 polytechnic institutes. "A large number of students in countries like the US and Singapore go for vocational education. Perhaps, India needs to do that as skill is very important while landing a job," said Mona Mourshed, partner (education), at consulting firm **McKinsey and Co**.

"Youth unemployability is a bigger problem than youth unemployment," said Gujarat principal secretary (education) Hasmukh Adhia, who signed the agreement on behalf of the state government.

Manish Sabharwal, chairman, TeamLease Services, said his company is adopting the university system because global experience shows that community colleges improve accessibility, increase inclusiveness, lower costs and create vertical mobility.

"Community colleges in the US typically provide skill-based training and are integrated into the formal higher learning system. This has been successfully emulated elsewhere in the world in what is called 'short cycle higher education', that has a shorter duration, mobility into higher education, and is held in good regard, socially. In contrast, vocational training in India is being catered to by the unorganized training sector," said Agarwal.

TLU will offer what it calls an "associate degree", rather than a diploma, which will confer credits recognized by degree programmes.

"After a student passes a diploma programme, he typically has to start afresh if he wants to pursue a degree. A student passing out of TLU's accounting technician course, on the other hand, will be able to join a BCom programme in the third year," said Sabharwal, although this will apply only in Gujarat for now.

"When we look at expansion on the national level, going forward we will approach the UGC so we can plug into their credit transfer system," he said. UGC, or University Grants Commission, is India's regulator for higher education.

Some institutes already offer associate degrees in India. Among them are Delhi's Indira Gandhi National Open University and a network of community colleges in Chennai run under the Indian Centre for Research and Development of Community Education.

Each of TLU's 22 colleges will look at enrolling 300-700 students.

Human resource development (HRD) minister Kapil Sibal recently announced plans for a vocational education framework for millions of students who either drop out of schools or don't pursue higher education for socio-economic reasons. While 220 million students pursue school education, fewer than 15 million take up higher education. The ministry has set up committees comprising experts from the information technology, telecom and automobile sectors to devise model curricula for vocational education in the relevant fields.

India pegged its unemployment rate at 9.4% in 2010, an increase of 1.2 percentage points over 2004-05, when the previous comprehensive survey was done.

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