**Preparing the youth**

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January 22, 2020

With the beginning of a new year and a new decade, this is an ideal time to begin thinking about how we as a country our preparing our youth for the future.

As a thought exercise, let’s think about the young children aged three and four who will be beginning their early schooling this year. In twenty years, these children will be entering the workforce, which will look very different than it does today.

According to the Future of Jobs Report, it is estimated that 65 percent of children entering primary school today will end up working in jobs that do not currently exist. In light of this uncertainty, an important challenge policymakers must address is to ensure that our education systems and skills development programs reflect the existing and anticipated needs of society and the workforce two decades from now.

To get a sense of how much the world has changed, think of some of the innovations in the past twenty years and how they have impacted society. This includes (but is not limited to) the rapid scale up of internet accessibility, having information at our fingertips with powerful search engines like Google, the introduction of the smart phone, social networking, and the expansion in the applications of artificial intelligence.

We have also witnessed life-changing advancements in medicine such as the sequencing of the human genome, stem cell research, targeted cancer therapies and development of bionic limbs. At the same time, war and conflict, social and environmental movements have also deeply impacted the world in the last two decades. These are exciting times and the rate of advancement isn’t linear, it’s exponential.

As the Future of Jobs reports highlights, the nature of the job market has also been significantly impacted and will continue to be shaped by these developments. And with developments in the applications of artificial intelligence, the loss of jobs due to automation is an increasing concern.

A study by Frey and Osbourne (2013) examined how susceptible jobs are to computerization (or automation) and estimated that 47 percent of total US employment is at risk of being redundant (for the 702 occupations that were studied). What is particularly worrisome is that occupations characterized by low wages and lower education are more susceptible to automation.

It is within this context that we must think about how our education systems and skills programmes are preparing Pakistani youth for the challenges of the future. So what do experts think will be the most in-demand skills for employers in the coming years? According to the Future of Jobs report, the most highly valued skills at the moment as cited by employers are complex problem solving skills and social skills. However, in terms of skills for the future workforce, it is forecasted that the growth in skills demand will be highest for cognitive abilities (that is, creativity, logical reasoning, mathematical reasoning, and cognitive flexibility) and system skills (that is, judgment and decision-making and systems analysis).

The question we must ask ourselves is: what are we doing to equip our youth (and teachers) with these skills? Can we build a digital Pakistan without having a strong foundation in the form of a quality basic education system? This is critical because if we fail to prepare our youth for the future, it is the low skilled, less educated individuals who are the most likely to be left behind.

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