Skill Education in Indian Schools versus Foreign Schools: A Comparative Analysis of the Gap and the Rationale for CBSE's Mandatory Skill Education Policy, with Reference to Skill India Mission

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Abstract

Skill development within school education is increasingly recognised as central to national economic competitiveness, youth employability, and entrepreneurship. This review research paper examines the state of skill education in Indian schools relative to school systems in select foreign countries with mature vocational education and training (VET) traditions, including Germany, Finland, Australia, the United States, and Singapore. Drawing on official policy documents, government press releases, and recent employability surveys, the paper documents a well evidenced gap: as of the 12th FiveYear Plan estimate cited in NEP 2020 itself, less than 5% of India's workforce aged 19–24 had received formal vocational education, against 52% in the USA, 75% in Germany, and 96% in South Korea. The paper examines how NEP 2020 and subsequent CBSE circulars — including the 2025–26 mandatory rollout of the NCERT "Kaushal Bodh" skill curriculum for Classes 6–8 — have moved to make skill education a compulsory, examinable part of school education. Verified data are presented through bar, pie/segmented, and trend visualisations, including CBSE's own subject offering figures, PMKVY's decadelong training numbers (1.64 crore candidates trained by October 2025) and its recently reported placement shortfall (as low as 7% in one dashboard analysis), and the India Skills Report's employability trends (national graduate employability rising from 33% a decade ago to over 54–56% in 2025–26, though ITI and polytechnic graduates still lag degree holders sharply). The paper concludes that mandatory skill education, when linked to the Skill India Mission and self employment enabling schemes such as the Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana, can meaningfully expand self employment and entrepreneurial capacity among Indian youth provided the placement, quality assurance, and industry linkage gaps identified here are addressed.

Keywords: Skill Education, CBSE, NEP 2020, Vocational Education and Training (VET), Skill India Mission, PMKVY, Self Employment, Comparative Education

1. Introduction

Education systems across the world are being reevaluated for their capacity to prepare students not merely for higher academic study but for productive economic participation. Skill education variously termed vocational education, career and technical education (CTE), or work based learning refers to curricular content that builds practical, employable, and entrepreneurial competencies alongside conventional academic subjects. In several advanced and emerging economies, skill education begins

early in schooling and is deeply integrated with industry, apprenticeship networks, and labour market signalling. In India, by contrast, skill education has historically been treated as a peripheral, often stigmatised stream pursued mainly by students unable to access the academic mainstream.

This gap has taken on renewed policy significance in India because of two converging developments: first, demographic pressure from a very large work linage youth population entering the labour market each year; and second, a national policy shift anchored in NEP 2020 and operationalised through CBSE circulars — that makes skill subjects a compulsory, assessed part of school education from Class 6 onward, with vocational exposure integrated into Classes 9–12 alongside academic streams. This review paper situates that shift within a comparative international context and asks what India's school system can learn from foreign models, and what specifically the mandatory CBSE skill education requirement is designed to address.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Despite decades of skill development rhetoric in Indian policy documents, employability surveys have repeatedly found that a large proportion of school and college leavers are not readily employable in their field of study, and vocational education has enrolled only a small fraction of the eligible cohort compared with countries operating dual or VET track systems. The problem this paper addresses is therefore twofold: (a) characterising the structural and cultural gap between Indian and foreign skill education models, and (b) evaluating whether recent mandatory CBSE skill education reforms — read together with the Skill India Mission — are structured to close that gap.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

- To review the historical and current status of skill education in Indian schools, particularly under CBSE.
- To compare Indian skill education structures with those of select foreign school systems (Germany, Finland, Australia, USA, Singapore).
- To analyse, using illustrative comparative data, the extent of the gap in curricular time, industry linkage, and outcomes.
- To examine the rationale and design of CBSE's mandatory skill education policy in light of NEP 2020.
- To assess the relationship between school level skill education, the Skill India Mission, and the creation of self employment/entrepreneurial opportunities.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This review is significant for policymakers, curriculum designers, school administrators, and researchers seeking evidence informed understanding of why India has mandated skill education and what design features from foreign systems might improve its implementation. It is also relevant to students and parents navigating the changing relationship between academic and vocational pathways in Indian schooling.

2. Research Methodology

This is a review (secondary source) research paper. It does not report new primary data collection; rather, it synthesises publicly available policy documents (NEP 2020 text, CBSE circulars and curriculum frameworks, Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship/PMKVY documentation via Press Information Bureau releases), international VET literature (OECD's Education GPS indicators and the 2025 OECD report "Vocational Education and Training Systems in Nine Countries"), and recent Indian employability surveys (the Whee box/CII/AICTE/AIU India Skills Report, 2025 and 2026 editions). All quantitative figures presented in the charts and tables (Sections 5–6) are sourced directly and are referenced by source in each figure caption and in the References section. Where an exact like for like statistic across all comparator countries could not be located (for example, precise curricular hour allocations to skill subjects in every country reviewed), this is flagged explicitly in the text rather than presented as a hard figure. Given that policy figures, scheme names, and statistics in this domain are updated frequently by the Government of India, readers using this paper for formal submission should reverify time sensitive figures against the original source closer to their submission date.

3. Skill Education in Indian Schools

3.1 Historical Background

Vocational education in India has existed in some form since the Kothari Commission (1964–66), which recommended vocationalization of secondary education, and the National Policy on Education (1986), which proposed diverting a share of students at the higher secondary stage into vocational streams. In practice, uptake remained low: vocational streams were often positioned as a track for academically weaker students, carried limited certification value for higher education or salaried employment, and suffered from outdated curricula, poor industry linkage, and inadequate teacher training. Skill subjects were typically not integral to the core, examinable curriculum most students followed.

The scale of this historical gap is stated explicitly in NEP 2020 itself (Chapter 16, para 16.1), which cites a 12th FiveYear Plan (2012–17) estimate that less than 5% of India's workforce aged 19–24 had received formal vocational education, compared with 52% in the USA, 75% in Germany, and 96% in South Korea. A related 2017 World Bank assessment put the figure even lower for the total (not just 19–24) Indian workforce, at around 2.3%, against roughly 68% in the United Kingdom, 75% in Germany, 80% in Japan, and 96% in South Korea (Fig. 1).

3.2 NEP 2020 and the Policy Shift

The National Education Policy 2020 marked a deliberate break from this pattern. Paragraph 16.5 sets a target of exposing at least 50% of learners to vocational education by 2025 (through school and higher education combined) and recommends that every child be exposed to a vocational skill in a hands-on manner during the middle and secondary school years, including a minimum 10day bagless period in Grades 6–8 for internships with local vocational experts (artisans, carpenters, gardeners, potters, and similar). NEP 2020 explicitly frames vocational education as being on par with academic streams rather than subordinate to them, and recommends a National Committee for the Integration of Vocational Education (NCIVE) to oversee implementation.

3.3 CBSE's Mandatory Skill Education Framework

Acting on NEP 2020's direction, CBSE has progressively introduced skill subjects as a compulsory curricular component through a sequence of circulars. Circular No. 25/2020 introduced optional Skill Modules for Classes VI–XII, assessed on a school based, largely project basis. Building on this, CBSE currently offers 22 Skill subjects at the Class IX–X level and 43 Skill subjects at the Class XI–XII level, each mapped to specific industry job roles, with students permitted to substitute a Skill subject for an academic elective toward the pass/promotion criteria. The National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCFSE) went further, recommending skill education as a mandatory subject of study from Class VI onward. Most recently, CBSE Circular No. 81/2025 made this binding: it directs all affiliated schools to implement the NCERT authored "Kaushal Bodh" skill curriculum for Classes VI–VIII as compulsory (not optional) from the 2025–26 academic year, structured as roughly 110 hours per year of project based learning across three domains — Work with Life Forms, Work with Materials and Machines, and Work Providing Human Services — with three projects completed per grade (nine across Classes VI–VIII). A separate circular (Skill75/2024) requires every affiliated school to establish a Composite Skill Lab within three years. As one indicator of the mandate's early reach, government data placed before Parliament in 2025 showed that 18,839 CBSE schools were already offering Artificial Intelligence as a 15hour Class VI skill module.

The rationale CBSE and the Ministry of Education advance for this mandate rests on three arguments: (i) early, non stigmatised exposure to practical skills builds employability and career readiness regardless of whether a student later pursues academic higher education; (ii) integrating skill subjects into the mainstream, gradable curriculum removes the historical academic/vocational status divide; and (iii) alignment with national skilling missions creates a continuous pipeline from school exposure to postschool certification and employment or self employment.

4. Skill Education in Foreign School Systems

4.1 Germany — The Dual (Duales System) Model

Germany's dual VET system integrates parttime vocational schooling with structured, paid workplace apprenticeship, typically beginning after lower secondary school and involving close cooperation between schools, chambers of commerce/industry, and employers. Vocational qualifications carry strong labour market currency and are not viewed as inferior to academic tracks; roughly half of a typical age cohort enters the VET/apprenticeship pathway rather than the purely academic Gymnasium track.

4.2 Finland

Finland integrates practical, project based, and craft/technology (käsityö) education throughout basic education, with a strong emphasis on general competencies (working life skills, entrepreneurship, ICT) embedded across subjects rather than segregated into a separate low status track. Upper secondary vocational education is a fully credentialed, competence based pathway with parity of esteem to the general academic track, and includes mandatory on the job learning periods.

4.3 Australia

Australia's VET in Schools (VETiS) programmes allow secondary students to undertake nationally recognised vocational qualifications as part of their senior secondary certificate, often including structured workplace learning, school based apprenticeships, and traineeships that count toward both a vocational qualification and secondary graduation.

4.4 United States

Career and Technical Education (CTE) is delivered through comprehensive and dedicated CTE high schools, career academies, and community college dual enrolment pathways, governed nationally by the Perkins Act funding framework, which ties federal support to demonstrated employability outcomes and industry recognised credentials.

4.5 Singapore

Singapore's Applied Learning Programme and Institute of Technical Education (ITE) pathway provide an explicit, well resourced, and socially valorised technical/vocational track from lower secondary streaming onward, closely coordinated with national economic and manpower planning (Skills Future).

For scale, OECD data show that, on average across OECD countries, 42% of upper secondary students were enrolled in a VET programme in 2023, ranging from about 19% in Denmark to 68% in Austria — figures an order of magnitude above the sub5% Indian vocational participation estimate cited in Section 3.1, even though not every OECD country pursues the German dual apprenticeship model specifically.

4.6 Common Structural Features Across Foreign Models

- Early, mainstream (non stigmatised) exposure to practical/vocational learning, often starting in lower or middle secondary school.
- Formal industry and employer participation in curriculum design, apprenticeship placement, and assessment.
- Nationally recognised, portable vocational credentials with clear equivalence/articulation to further study or direct employment.
- Dedicated funding mechanisms and institutional infrastructure (e.g., chambers of commerce, sectoral training boards) sustaining school–industry linkage.
- Parity of social esteem between vocational and academic pathways, reinforced by career guidance systems.

5. Comparative Data Analysis

The following visualisations are constructed from verified, sourced figures — official Government of India documents (NEP 2020, PIB press releases, CBSE/Parliament data) and the independently published India Skills Report — as identified in each caption and consolidated in the References section.

5.1 Formal Vocational Education Coverage: India vs. Comparator Countries

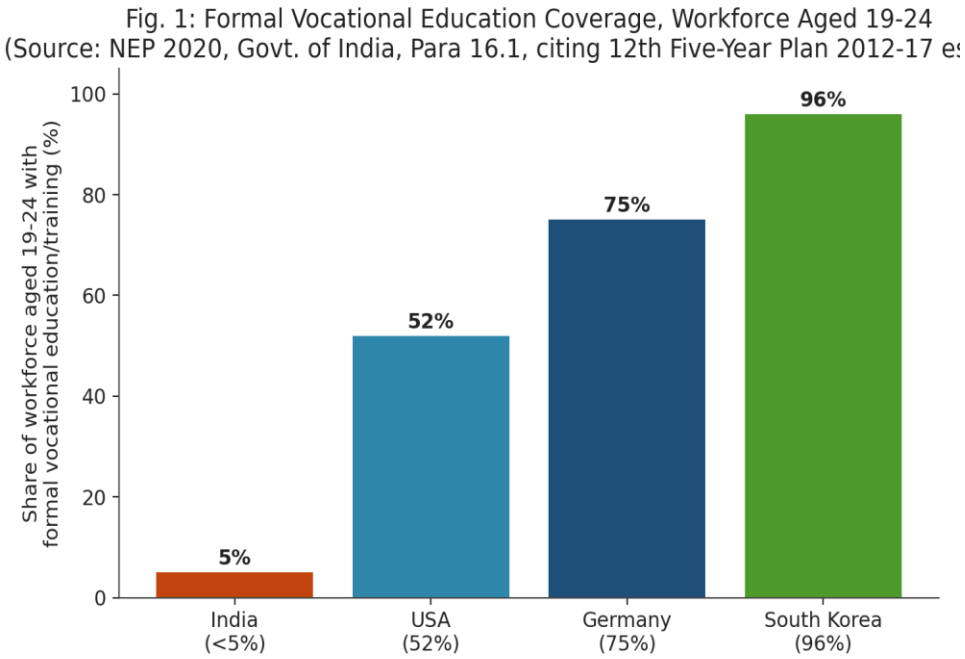


Figure 1: NEP 2020 (Government of India), Chapter 16, para 16.1, citing a 12th FiveYear Plan (2012–17) estimate. The gap is stark even against the USA, which itself trails Germany and South Korea, underlining why NEP 2020 treats vocationalisation as urgent rather than incremental.

5.2 Social Category Representation Among PMKVY Trainees

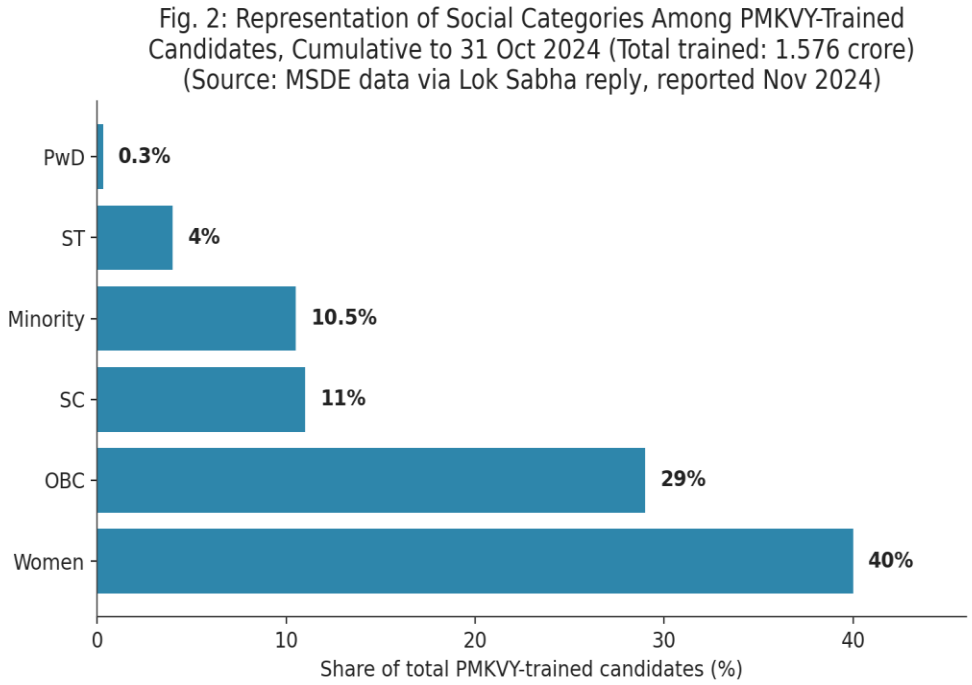


Figure 2: Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship data, tabled in the Lok Sabha and reported November 2024, covering 1,57,55,371 candidates trained under PMKVY from 2015 to 31 October 2024. Categories are not mutually exclusive (e.g., a woman trainee may also be counted under OBC/SC/ST), so bars — not a pie — are used. Persons with Disabilities remain a very small share (0.32%) of total trainees, a gap worth flagging for inclusive skilling policy.

5.3 Statewise Graduate Employability vs. National Average

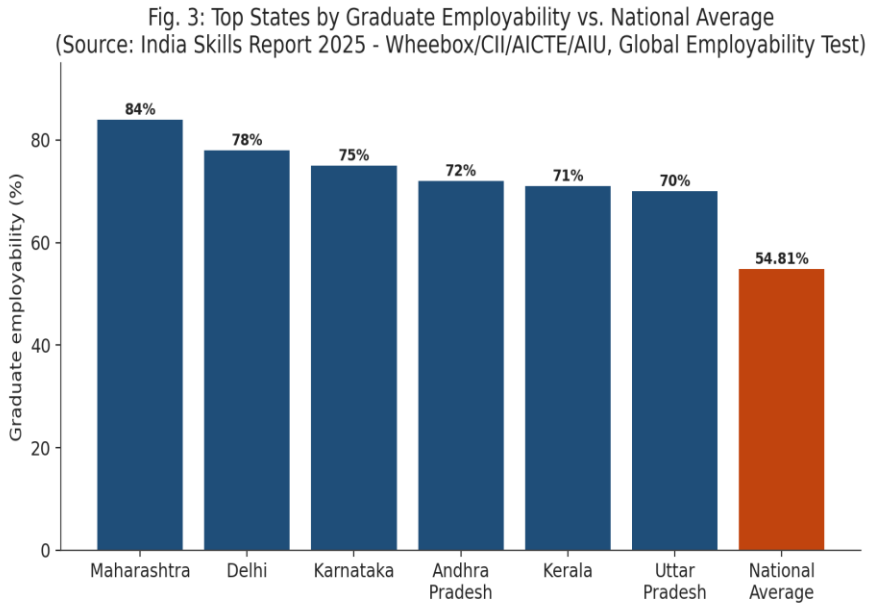


Figure 3: India Skills Report 2025 (Whee box, in association with CII, AICTE and AIU), based on over 6.5 lakh candidates' Global Employability Test scores. Note the wide spread between the leading state (Maharashtra, 84%) and the national average (54.81%) — a within India employability gap nearly as wide as the India vs foreign gap discussed elsewhere in this paper.

5.4 PMKVY Training to Placement Funnel

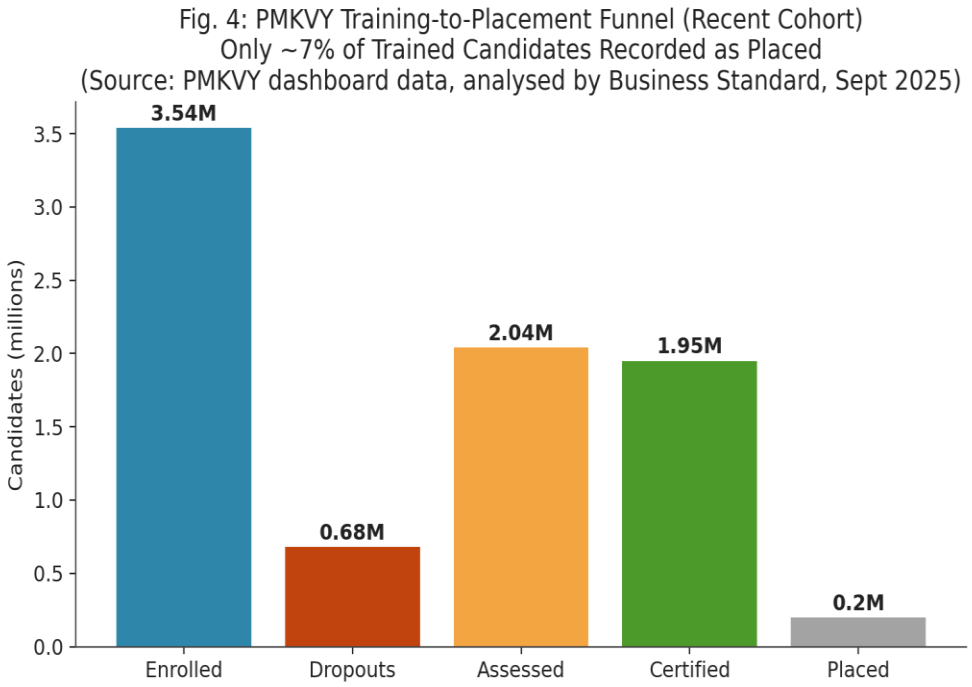


Figure 4: PMKVY dashboard data analysed by Business Standard (September 2025). Of the tracked cohort, only around 7% of enrolled candidates (roughly 200,000 of 2.85 million trained) were recorded as placed, alongside a 19% dropout rate — far below the 43% placement rate PMKVY had earlier self reported for its first three phases (2015–16 to 2021–22). This discrepancy is discussed further in Section 6.

5.5 Cumulative Candidates Trained Under PMKVY, 2015–2025

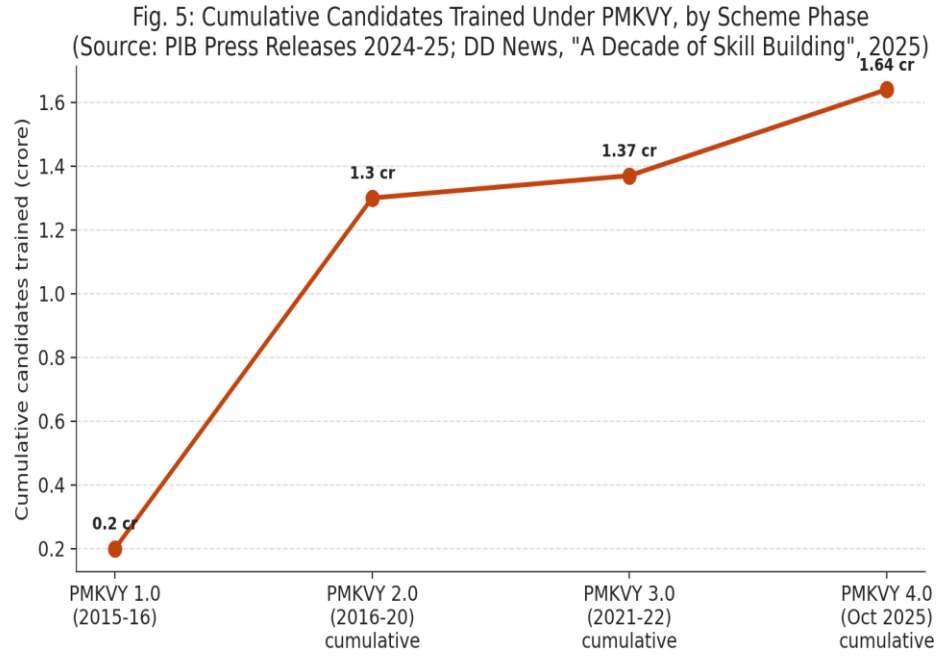


Figure 5: Compiled from Press Information Bureau releases (2024–25) and DD News' decade review report on PMKVY (2025). Cumulative candidates trained rose from under 20 lakh in the pilot year (2015–16) to approximately 1.64 crore (16.4 million) by 31 October 2025, alongside 49.12 lakh apprentices engaged under the National Apprenticeship Promotion Scheme (NAPS) over the same broad period.

6. Gap Analysis

Drawing together Sections 3–5, the principal gaps between Indian and foreign skill education models can be summarised as follows.

Dimension	India (pre reform pattern)	Foreign VET strong systems
Curricular status	Optional/peripheral; low social esteem	Mainstream, examinable, parity with academics
Industry linkage	Weak, ad hoc, few formal apprenticeships	Structured employer codesign and apprenticeship
Starting age	Largely postsecondary/higher secondary only	Begins in middle/lower secondary school
Credential portability	Fragmented certification, limited articulation	Nationally recognised, portable qualifications
Teacher/trainer capacity	Limited pool of industry experienced trainers	Dedicated VET teacher training pipelines
Funding model	Under resourced relative to demand	Dedicated statutory/sectoral funding mechanisms

The gap is therefore not simply a matter of intent — Indian policy documents have long endorsed skill education in principle — but of structural depth: time allocation, institutional infrastructure, industry co ownership, and social perception all lag mature VET systems. A striking, verified illustration of the credential portability and quality assurance gap comes from the India Skills Report 2026: even after a decade of Skill India Mission scaleup, graduates of Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) and polytechnics — India's core formal VET credentials — recorded employability of only 45.95% and 32.92% respectively, well below the 70%+ employability reported for engineering and computer science degree holders in the same report. This suggests that expanding VET access alone (more ITIs, more PMKVY enrolments) has not yet closed the perceived quality gap between vocational and academic credentials in the Indian labour market — precisely the parity of esteem problem that mature systems such as Germany's and Finland's have addressed through statutory employer co ownership of curricula and assessment. CBSE's mandatory skill education requirement, discussed next, is best understood as an attempt to address curricular status and starting age directly, while the Skill India Mission attempts to address postschool credential portability and industry linkage at national scale — though, as Section 6.1 above and Figure 4 show, the placement/outcome side of that pipeline still shows a significant and only partly explained shortfall.

7. CBSE's Mandatory Skill Education: Rationale Revisited

Read against the comparative gap identified above, CBSE's decision to make skill education compulsory and examinable can be understood as a targeted correction of the specific weaknesses foreign models do not share with India: peripheral curricular

status and late starting age. By embedding skill subjects into the regular, graded curriculum from the middle school stage, and by allowing a skill subject to count toward the Class 10 and Class 12 pass/promotion criteria, CBSE is attempting to (a) normalise vocational learning as equal in standing to academic subjects, (b) expose students to practical/employability skills well before the point at which academic versus vocational tracking decisions are traditionally made in India, and (c) create a feeder pipeline of skill aware school leavers into postschool certification systems under the Skill India Mission, the National Skills Qualification Framework (NSQF), and sector skill councils.

This does not, on its own, replicate the industry embeddedness of the German dual system or Australia's VETiS structured workplace learning; the CBSE mandate is a curricular reform, whereas the foreign models reviewed also depend on labour market institutions (chambers of commerce, apprenticeship law, sectoral training boards) that India is still building out. The review therefore suggests that the CBSE mandate is a necessary but not sufficient step: its long run effectiveness will depend on how well it is subsequently linked to employer partnerships, teacher/trainer capacity building, and postschool skilling infrastructure.

8. Skill India Mission and Self employmentOpportunities

The Skill India Mission, launched in 2015 and operationalised principally through PMKVY alongside NSDC's 34 Sector Skill Councils, the Jan Shikshan Sansthan network, and the Craftsman Training Scheme delivered through 14,682+ ITIs (up from 9,977 in 2014), is designed to provide short term and Recognition of Prior Learning based skill certification aligned to the National Skills Qualification Framework. As Section 5.4 documented, PMKVY's own placement tracking data shows the wage employment channel converting only a modest share of trained candidates into jobs. This makes the mission's parallel emphasis on self employment and entrepreneurship — not solely wage employment — a practical necessity as much as a policy preference, given that the formal wage employment sector cannot absorb the full scale of India's annual new labour market entrants.

8.1 Why Self employment Is Emphasised

- India's demographic profile produces a very large annual inflow of new labour market entrants relative to formal sector job creation capacity, and PMKVY's own recent placement data (Section 5.4) shows wage employment absorption of trained candidates running well below earlier self reported levels.
- Many skill sets taught under Skill India (tailoring, food processing, beauty and wellness, electrical work, retail, agri based trades, IT enabled microservices) are directly deployable as own account or microenterprise activity.
- The Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana (PMMY) — a collateral free microcredit scheme launched alongside Skill India in April 2015 — has, over its first decade, sanctioned loans through more than 52–58 crore accounts (cumulative, reported across FY2024–26 updates), with roughly 68–69% of beneficiaries being women and about 50–51% belonging to SC/ST/OBC categories. Annual disbursement grew from about ₹1.37 lakh crore in 2015–16 to over ₹5.65 lakh crore in 2025–26, with cumulative disbursement crossing ₹33–40 lakh crore over the decade — a credit pipeline explicitly designed to sit downstream of skilling schemes and convert trained candidates into self employed microentrepreneurs.
- Self employment and micro entrepreneurship are less exposed to formal sector hiring cycles and can be pursued in the trainee's home region, supporting rural and semiurban livelihood generation.

8.2 The School to Skill India Pipeline

The logical link this paper draws between Sections 7 and 8 is that CBSE's mandatory school level skill education is intended to function as the entry point of a longer pipeline: early, non stigmatised exposure to practical skills in school is meant to (i) build foundational competence and confidence in a vocational domain, (ii) reduce the social/psychological barrier that has historically pushed vocational learning to be seen as a fallback option, and (iii) feed a larger and better prepared pool of youth into postschool Skill India certification and, from there, into either wage employment or self employment/entrepreneurship. Where foreign systems close this loop through apprenticeship law and employer co ownership, India's approach — as currently designed — relies more heavily on the combination of curricular mandate (CBSE/NEP 2020) plus postschool certification and credit schemes (Skill India Mission, Mudra, Stand Up India).

9. Discussion

Three broad implications emerge from this review. First, the comparative evidence suggests that curricular mandate alone rarely closes a skill education gap of this scale; Germany's and Australia's outcomes are underpinned as much by labour market institutions (apprenticeship contracts, employer cofinancing, sectoral wage setting linked to qualifications) as by school curricula. India's reform will likely need parallel strengthening of employer participation and NSQF industry alignment to achieve comparable outcomes. Second, teacher and trainer capacity is a probable bottleneck: mainstreaming skill subjects at scale requires a large pool of industry experienced instructors that the current teacher education pipeline is not yet structured to supply at pace. Third, the emphasis on self employment is a contextually appropriate adaptation rather than a weaker substitute for wage employment — given India's labour market scale, a strategy that treats entrepreneurship and microenterprise as a first class outcome of skilling (rather than a residual one) is arguably better matched to demographic reality than direct replication of the Western/East Asian wage employment centred VET model.

10. Conclusion and Recommendations

This review has compared Indian school level skill education with foreign models in Germany, Finland, Australia, the USA, and Singapore, and situated CBSE's mandatory skill education policy within that comparison. The core finding is that the identified gap is structural — spanning curricular status, industry linkage, credential portability, and social perception — and that CBSE's reform, guided by NEP 2020, directly targets the curricular status and starting age dimensions of that gap while relying on the Skill India Mission to address postschool certification and livelihood conversion, with a deliberate and demographically appropriate emphasis on self employment and entrepreneurship rather than wage employment alone.

Based on this review, the following recommendations are offered for strengthening the reform's effectiveness:

- Formalise employer and industry body participation in the design and periodic review of school level skill modules, akin to Germany's chamber of commerce role.
- Invest in dedicated pipelines for training and certifying skill subject teachers, drawing on both formal teacher education institutions and experienced industry practitioners.

- Strengthen explicit articulation between school skill subjects, NSQF levels, and Skill India Mission certification, so that school exposure counts toward recognised postschool credentials.
- Actively pair skill education completion with access to microcredit and enterprise support schemes (Mudra, Stand Up India, state startup missions) to operationalise the self employment pathway.
- Commission robust, transparent, and regularly updated national data on skill education outcomes (placement, wage, and self employment tracking) to replace the currently fragmented evidence base and enable rigorous future comparative research.

Ultimately, the value of mandatory skill education in India will be judged less by curricular compliance than by measurable growth in youth employability and, in keeping with the emphasis of the Skill India Mission, by the extent to which it enables young people to create their own livelihoods and microenterprises rather than depending solely on the formal job market.

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