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# Comparing General vs. Specialized Educational Programs: Which Approach is Superior?

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**Abstract:** The article compares general educational programmes and specialized programmes in the key advantages offered by each. Advocates for general educational programs opine that a broad-based education better equips students for success in a rapidly changing job market, while supporters of specialized programmes believe that a more targeted education is more efficient and effective. This article provides an overview of the main arguments on both sides and considers the evidence from empirical studies. The paper concludes that the optimal approach depends on the individual student and their future career aspirations.

**Keywords:** Higher Education, NEP 2020, General Education, Specialized Education, University, Education Policy, Career

## INTRODUCTION

General education, is a type of education that focuses on providing students with a broad foundation of knowledge and skills across a range of subjects. It is designed to give students a well-rounded education that prepares them for a variety of careers and life experiences. (Benson, Morgan and Tennakoon 2012) The goal of general education is to provide students with a diverse set of knowledge and skills that they can draw upon in their future endeavors, whether they choose to pursue further education or enter the workforce. (Jackson 2013) In contrast to specialized education, which focuses on a specific subject or area of study, general education is designed to be broad and flexible, allowing students to explore a range of subjects and develop a wide range of skills.

Specialized education programs on the other hand, in which students focus on a specific subject or area of study, have a long history. In ancient civilizations, for example, students who wanted to become doctors or philosophers would typically receive specialized education in those fields. (Moin 2022) In more recent times, specialized education programs have become more common in various fields, such as the arts, sciences, and trade industries. For example, in the 19th

and early 20th centuries, many schools and universities began offering specialized programs in subjects like engineering, business, and journalism. (Wok and Hashim 2014).

It is difficult to pinpoint a specific time when education programs became widely specialized, as the process has likely occurred gradually over many years. However, it is clear that specialized education programs have played a significant role in the development of various fields and industries and continue to do so today. (Jackson 2013)

## METHOD

This study employs a qualitative comparative analysis method to explore the key distinctions and advantages between general and specialized educational programmes within the context of higher education. The research is based on a comprehensive literature review of academic journals, policy documents—particularly the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020—and previous empirical studies that examine educational outcomes and career readiness. Data were collected through document analysis, focusing on scholarly arguments, curriculum frameworks, and statistical evidence related to graduate success from both general and specialized programs. The findings were synthesized to present a balanced perspective and to highlight how different educational pathways align with diverse student needs and career goals.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Advantages of Specialized Education Programmes over General Programmes Practical and nuanced learning

A key feature of specialized education programmes is the aspect of exposure to a specific sector or skill area. The method using which this exposure to the skill area is achieved varies across programmes. Programmes typically integrate methodologies like apprenticeships, practical training, industrial visits, capstone projects, live projects and other methods to provide hands-on experience. The experiences of learners may greatly vary depending on the industry, firm and specific role in which they gain practical or hands-on experience. Specialized programs allow students to delve deeply into a specific subject or area of study, which can lead to a more thorough understanding and expertise in that field.

### Overcoming shortages of faculty

A key barrier to nuanced learning is the shortage of faculty in India which is exacerbated for sector-specific programmes. The article (Moin 2022) estimates a 30-40 percent shortage of faculty across all HEIs in India which presents itself as a significant barrier to quality education. It is also reported that only a small proportion of NET-qualified students are recruited as faculty due to shortages of funding across the HEIs in India. The HEIs offering sectoral programmes are however able to counteract this by learning through professional, who have several years of hands-on experience. However in order for sectoral programmes to achieve their full potential it is necessary to augment the available pool of academicians adept in delivering specific sectoral programmes of study.

### Creating a professional identity

The study (Jackson 2013) asserts that the experience of students in a work-integrated programme shapes their professional identity even before they step into the regular workforce. This pre-professional identity is shaped by their nuanced exposure to the aspects of a profession they have been integrated into.

While higher education imparting institutions in India strive to provide a uniform experience to all its students in terms of the academic experience and learning, the limited ability of industries and firms to absorb interns and trainees has led to a selective process. Interns/ trainees and firms, based on mutual interest and preference associate for a training programme. Often, the number of interns that a firm is limited and therefore HEIs have to rely on a number of firms to absorb their entire student strength. This results in students being placed across different firms and different industry sectors or sub-sectors within the same industry. This leads to a set of diverse experiences that help form the student's professional identity. Reputed firms generally drive better experiences in terms of learning and development while being more selective towards students performing better. This sometimes results in less-than-ideal experiences for weaker students who are constrained to join less reputable firms or in less attractive roles.

**Career preparation**

Even with the diverse experiences across the batch, there are ample scope for cross and peer learning if suitable opportunities are facilitated by the institution. The nuanced learning and the exposure helps students to make better career choices allowing them to steer their gainful employment in the direction of their interests within a particular sector.

The study (Nadelson, et al. 2015) reports that the development of a professional identity among students has far reaching implications in their career and has positive influences on academic learning, interest in the subject and career success. Specialized programs often prepare students for specific careers, giving them the skills and knowledge, they need to succeed in their chosen profession.

**Better networking and professional connects**

Specialized programs often attract students with similar interests and career goals, which can provide opportunities to build professional networks and connections in the field. The study (Wok and Hashim 2014) asserts that the role of information power helps in building better professional networks and is a key determinant of how successful a negotiation would be for landing a job. The information power referred to in this instance is essentially the nuanced knowledge a professional would acquire through their exposure and experience to an industry

**Improved job prospects**

The study Investing in Adolescent Development- A case for India (Institute for Competitiveness 2021) claims that every year of education is valuable, adding 6.7 percent to a person's income for every year of completed education. The nuanced knowledge that students studying in specialized programmes acquire is in many cases from experts who have several years of work experience in the sector. For students or graduates to acquire this specialized knowledge would take some time and effort.

Employers often prefer candidates with specialized knowledge and skills, so completing a specialized program can increase a student's chances of getting a job in their chosen field. The students or graduates with specialized knowledge are often more prepared to handle day-to-day tasks and have better productivity since they would have a headstart with the knowledge required to do the job. Candidates with educational qualifications highly aligned to the job requirements often find themselves in a favourable position with employers who find the prospect of better productivity and lower investments in training highly attractive.

**Personal fulfillment**

For some students, pursuing a specialized program can be personally fulfilling as it allows them to focus on an area that truly interests and motivates them. It is worth noting that general education programs also have their own advantages, such as providing a broad foundation of knowledge that can be useful in a variety of fields and situations. Ultimately, the choice between a specialized and general program will depend on an individual's goals, interests, and career aspirations.

**Advantages of General Programmes over Specialized Education Programmes Better mobility across jobs**

The advantages of general skills over a specialized skillset in the context of CEOs has been discussed in the study (Custodio, Ferreira and Matos 2017), tested the hypothesis whether CEOs with generalist skills foster innovation better than CEOs with more specialized skills. The study noted that generalist CEOs have better mobility across jobs and can move across different sectors much easier than their specialized CEO counterparts. The study also showed evidence of generalist CEOs having a greater risk appetite since they had a wider range of experience and lower vulnerability to being terminated. The study argued that CEOs with generalized skills have an ability to move on to different sectors and leave behind failures that they might have experienced in a specific sector.

**Exploiting multi-disciplinary and cross-functional learning**

The point of generalists being able to fully exploit multi-disciplinary and cross-functional learning is made in the paper as well. CEOs who have work experience across industries are able to bring back their learnings to other sectors effectively allowing to drive more innovation. General education programs provide a broad foundation of knowledge across a range of subjects, which can be useful in a variety of fields and situations.

**Flexibility in choice of subjects**

General education programs allow students to explore a range of subjects and areas of study, giving them the flexibility to choose a major or career path that best suits their interests and goals. The emerging trend of flexibility in academic programmes has been detailed in the study (Zwaan 2017). The study details the increasing popularity of online learning and MOOCs along with the shift from knowledge-based learning to the ability to solve problems. This translates to students and firms preferring more industry-aligned subjects and topics that have real-world applications over theoretical knowledge. Institutions offering general programmes often provide a wide range of electives for students to choose from as per their desired interest areas. While specialized programmes also have incorporated some degree of flexibility, their ability to cover a more diverse range of topics similar to a general programme is severely limited.

**Transferability of skills**

The skills and knowledge gained in a general education program, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication, can be applied to a wide range of careers and situations. The study (Custodio, Ferreira and Matos 2017) makes this assertion in the context of CEOs with a general skillset, who were found to possess the ability to apply learnings from one sector to other.

In the Indian context, given the initiatives like Digital India, Unified Payment Interfaces, India Stack among others, many solutions are sector-agnostic in nature and adaptable across many

industries and touchpoints. Following this trend, many industries like agriculture, healthcare and education are increasingly adopting similar solutions to deliver services at scale. The role of a generalist in applying cross-sectoral learnings becomes much more significant given the current developments, both in India and the world.

**Versatility**

A general education can prepare students for a variety of careers, rather than being limited to a specific field. The versatility of a professional is a key factor determining upward mobility since it is indicative of the ability of the individual to take up mid or higher management roles. While specialization does give an added advantage in securing a job, the career advancement is heavily reliant on the ability of an individual to handle diverse teams and solve intricate and complex problems.

Developing an understanding of the work done by teams in various functional areas is a key requirement of the leadership in any organization. Developing a better understanding of the roles and the ability to guide the team around challenges is a key leadership skill which generalists are more likely to develop better.

**Policies in India for Specialized Programmes**

India has a number of policies in place that support specialized education. The country has a large number of specialized schools and institutions that offer education in a wide range of fields, including engineering, medicine, business, and the arts. The Indian government also supports specialized education through various scholarship and funding programs. For example, the All-India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) provides financial assistance to students who are pursuing technical and vocational education, and the Ministry of Human Resource Development offers scholarships for students in fields such as engineering, medicine, and the sciences.

In addition, the government has established a number of institutions and programs specifically aimed at promoting specialized education, such as the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and the National Institutes of Technology (NITs), which are highly respected institutions that offer specialized education in engineering and technology. The Indian government places a high value on specialized education and has implemented a range of policies and initiatives to support it. As an example, the Indian Government, in anticipation of the agricultural revolution has been instrumental in the setup of agricultural universities under the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR). The first agricultural university was setup in Pantnagar, Uttar Pradesh in 1960 following which several agriculture-focused universities were established across India.

As of January 2021, there are three Central Agricultural Universities, four Deemed Universities and 63 State Agricultural Universities in India. There have been a number of policies and committee reports in India that have placed emphasis on specialized education. Some examples include:

- **The National Policy on Education (1986) and the Programme of Action (1992):** These documents, which outline the Indian government's education policies, recognize the importance of specialized education and provide guidelines for its development and expansion (Ministry of Education 1968).
- **The Tandon Committee Report (2009):** This report, which was prepared by the Committee on Technical Education, called for the expansion of technical and vocational education in India and recommended the establishment of more specialized institutions and

programs. As an outcome of the report submitted by the committee headed by Prof. P. N. Tandon, the Ministry of Education (erstwhile Ministry of Human Resource Development) granted the "Deemed-to-be-University" status to several institutions offering specialized courses. The ministry recognized the contribution of these institutions in enriching the institution itself and the University system.

- **The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT):** This organization, which is responsible for the development of education policies in India, has focused on the promotion of specialized education in fields such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM).
- **The All-India Council for Technical Education (AICTE):** This organization, which is responsible for the regulation and development of technical education in India, has implemented a range of initiatives to support specialized education, including scholarships, funding programs, and accreditation standards.

The debate between general education and specialized education is a complex one, and both approaches have their own advantages and disadvantages. In the Indian context, specialized education has long been supported by various policies and initiatives, such as the National Policy on Education, the Tandon Committee Report, and the All-India Council for Technical Education (AICTE). These policies and initiatives have played a significant role in the development and expansion of specialized education in India, which has become a major focus of the country's education system.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is important to also recognize the value of general education in preparing students for a wide range of careers and life experiences. General education programs provide students with a broad foundation of knowledge and skills that can be applied in a variety of fields and situations. While specialized education may prepare students for specific careers, general education can provide a more versatile and adaptable education that can serve students well in an ever-changing world.

Ultimately, the choice between general education and specialized education will depend on an individual's goals, interests, and career aspirations. Both approaches can be valuable, and it is important to consider the strengths and limitations of each in order to make an informed decision.

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