



Enabling young adults to lead their journey towards employability through

evidence based review - Anushri Alva, Ashvini Patil, Aparna Dubey, Priya Agrawal

1. Introduction

“After school, what? What do I do after class 12?”

This is the overwhelming sentiment among young adults, which has only been exacerbated by the pandemic.

Close to 1 million youth turn 18 every month(Sengupta, 2016), of whom an overwhelming 50% do not complete high school. Over time, this has resulted in millions of young adults who can neither afford higher education nor secure decent employment. What then happens to these young minds? Some indulge in delinquent behavior, while others are forced to work in exploitative conditions. Underage girls are married off and become pregnant. And a staggering number of youth give into substance addiction every day.

Additionally the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS, 2017-18) reports that just around 60% graduates, 68% postgraduates and 70% diploma/certificate holders participate in the labor force and remaining choose to be out of the labor force for different reasons, especially girls who are required to take care of domestic duties or are not allowed to work citing security reasons. This is when 46% of enrolments in higher education constitute girls (ESAG, 2018). Same is evident from the declining LFPR(%) for females which has gone down from 29% in 2004-05 to 18% in 2017-18.

According to the ILO, more than 30% of India's youth do absolutely nothing (ILO & OECD, 2020).

All this, when roughly 4,00,000 new jobs are created every single month (prior to Covid)(Kapoor, 2019), and an acute shortage of skills has been reported across all sectors to fulfil these jobs. According to the India Skill report, 2018 only 47 per cent of those coming out of higher educational institutions are employable (UNDP, AICTE & Wheebox, 2018). As per the report, employers perceive “Domain Understanding”, “Adaptability” and “Positive Attitude” to be the most important skills in a candidate. Communication skills, Problem-solving skills, Logical reasoning, Data interpretation, and essential life skills such as Adaptability, Positive attitude, Collaboration, etc are also considered to be of utmost importance while screening a candidate for a job. However our education system does not expose or encourage young adults to attain life skills training or pursue internship opportunities during their graduation years, which is essential for exposure to the real workplace environment. Today, learning level outcomes are well defined and well understood at a purely academic level. Grade level reading, writing, numeracy and even science learning is understood universally today. However, there is no accepted and universally understood language to understand employability. Thus, the vast spends on skills education has a very diffused impact.

Additionally, it is pertinent to note that besides the apparent disconnect between what the industry expects from an employable youth and insufficiency of the present educational and skilling ecosystem to prepare the youth for the job market, the

problem of unemployment is also accentuated by a largely demand driven approach to solving the unemployability issue. Much of the present day measures (explained later in section 2 of the report) undertaken to mitigate the unemployment problem, are designed to address the industry needs and are generally not woven around addressing youth aspirations. This unilateral approach to solving the unemployment problem has resulted in compartmentalizing youth to fit into set job moulds which in turn can result in an unengaged youth workforce, especially for youth from the bottom of the pyramid.

Through the numerous years of work on the ground counseling, training and placing young adults in career opportunities of choice, and continuing to mentor them and building a supportive alumni network, Antarang has learnt and built on what it takes for a young adult to be employable and what it takes for an institution/ organization to nurture employability. Antarang Foundation has successfully introduced the concept of careers to young adults who are otherwise disconnected from mainstream careers. To address all the above and taking into account all of these learnings, Antarang in partnership with Adhyayan Foundation has developed an Employability Diagnostic that could be used by young adults to measure their career readiness levels. Besides offering an insight into their overall career readiness, the tool also offers detailed guidance on the measures that can help the youth work on improving their work readiness levels, thus empowering them to take charge of their journeys into the careers of their choice. The tool thus seeks to rebalance the employment equation by laying equal emphasis on both aspects of job creation, namely youth aspiration and industry demands.

Further, the tool is also meant to enable service providers working in the space of youth employability to articulate a shared vision and goals in a common language that can be used to work towards the productive futures of our youth..

2. Tools and techniques used to transition young adults to career readiness

2.1 Overview of the landscape of interventions for transitioning young adults to career readiness

A study on demographic dividend in India by United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) reveals that, presently over 60% of India's population is expected to be in the working age group of 15-59 years. The demographic benefit, which India currently enjoys by virtue of a high proportion of the working age population, is expected to play out for a period of five decades, longer than any other country in the world (Singh, 2019). However, when juxtaposed against the grim state of India's employment landscape, rendered for the worse by the Covid crisis, the ability to harness the potential of the demographic dividend emerges as a major cause of national concern. The problem becomes compounded when we consider the fact that the youth unemployment rate in India is almost thrice the national average. As per Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS, 2017-18), the unemployment rate for youth (age range 15 to 29 years) stood at 17.8% - substantially higher than the national average of 6.1%.

A plethora of initiatives have been implemented at all levels, be it by the national or state level government bodies, private sector entities and social sector organisations

to address the problem of unemployment and ensuring a smoother transition of young adults into career readiness and jobs. These initiatives have broadly taken the shape of career counselling programs, skilling programs both in both vocational and soft skills, creation of avenues for formally recognising the skills of informal sector workers through national level assessments and certification, setting up of job matching platforms etc.

2.1.1 Government-led skilling initiatives

Recognising the lack of an adequately skilled labour force to be a driving cause of unemployment, much of the emphasis of various government schemes has taken the shape of implementation of vocational skilling programs. A case in point, is the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) 2016-20 launched under the Skill India Mission ([Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojna](#), 2020), with an objective to skilling people under Short Term Training (STT) and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) schemes.

In order to ensure better alignment of these training programs to meet industry demands of a skilled labour force, the government has sought industry inputs through industry-led Sector Skill councils for framing the training program curricula and assessment frameworks ([NSDC - SSC](#), 2020). In order to better facilitate placement of skilled candidates, the government has created a number of structures to facilitate a more effective confluence between job-seekers and employers, the format of which has evolved over time. The National Career Service (NCS) is a mission mode project which offers citizens a one-stop solution for all career related

services. The online-offline model combines (1) an online platform that brings together employment providers, counsellors, skill providers and job seekers to ensure a match of supply and demand, which is complemented by (2) physical Model Career Centres established at the district level as well as employment exchanges ([NCS](#), 2020).

The government has also launched the Skill Saathi counselling program to create awareness of Skill India Mission, inform youth about opportunities in vocational education and facilitate psychometric testing to guide aspirants in making their career and educational choices basis their interest mapping ([Skill Sathi](#) 2020). An example of career counselling initiative by a state level body includes the Kal (career interest mapping) and Abhikshamata (aptitude mapping) Chachni introduced by the Maharashtra government to cater to adolescents and young adults in government schools and to guide them in their education and career choices ([Mahamitra](#), 2020).

2.1.2 Private sector led skilling initiatives

Apart from various government-led initiatives, the private sector has also been an active contributor to the various initiatives established to promote employability of youth. Broadly the private sector—both corporates and social businesses— have contributed to career readiness initiatives by providing career counselling solutions, on-the-job vocational training, running skill development institutes and financially supporting nonprofits and social businesses as providers of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET). For instance, construction conglomerate

L&T runs its own construction skills training institutes which provide short term training in various industry trades ([L&T construction skill institute](#), 2020).

2.1.3 Social sector led skilling initiatives

The third pillar of the employability ecosystem which has played a crucial role in catalysing the journey of youth towards career readiness and employment is the social sector. Entities in the social sector have approached employability in a more holistic way, with programs encompassing life skills education, work readiness, digital and financial literacy, leadership development, entrepreneurship, career guidance and job placements. Programs are often designed to address the specific needs of the communities served by not-for-profit organisations ((Dasra and Godrej, 2012). Examples of some nonprofits operating in Livelihoods and Career guidance space include Kherwadi Social Welfare Association, Medha, LAHI, Quest Alliance, Dr.Reddy's Foundation, Wadhwani Foundation, Antarang Foundation, Cap Foundation. While a few of the not-for-profit organisations have focussed on providing sector agnostic employability skills training which includes career guidance, career exploration and work skills training; majority of these organisations have focussed on providing technical skills training combined with life skills training and placement services. To a great extent, the technical courses in which training is imparted is guided by industry demand supply scenario and is designed to address the entry level openings in various sectors.

2.2 Gaps in skilling young adults

A quick overview of the aforementioned measures taken by the various players in the employment ecosystem clearly highlights that:

- a) the process of transitioning youth to career readiness and employment is largely driven by industry demand for a skilled labour force, with not much room being present for youth ownership of the journey. This is evident from the high emphasis of most livelihoods programs on building technical skills of youth with design and choice of training programs being built around meeting industry specific needs. Oftentimes this demand is driven by plugging short-term gaps, rather than thinking of longer-term trajectories of growth for young adults joining the workforce. An industry led approach to employment transition also results in pigeon-holing the youth into fixed types of jobs with no scope for individual career choices. The problem of being pigeon holed into pre-set careers occurs within every strata of society. While youth from economically disadvantaged backgrounds may tend to be slotted into set vocational pathways such as those of plumbing, carpentry, electrical etc, economically empowered youth may tend to be slotted into fixed set of career choices such as those of engineering, medicine, accounting etc.
- b) the bulk of the prevailing career guidance solutions lay greater emphasis on testing of competencies and aptitudes along with career suitability with not much scope being created for anchoring youth aspirations, i.e. the career recommendation reports very often suggest a host of career pathways that

can be chosen by the youth on the basis of their skills and competencies without really accounting for the suggestions around the career aspirations of the youth, and therefore in that sense are unilateral in their approach

- c) Every program uses its own metrics to define and track success. Most often metrics of success include placement rates, retention rates, salary levels attained etc. This results in the impact of these various interventions becoming myopic or diffused as there isn't a common set of comprehensive metrics and shared vision of employability for youth towards which everyone is working.

Adoption of a largely demand driven approach to solving the unemployment issue results in a disconnect between the innate aspirations of young adults and the available career pathways which are more aligned to the prevailing job scenario.. The need of the hour is therefore to lay equal emphasis on youth-led processes to transitioning to employment to ensure that they are passionately and productively involved in making the journeys to the careers of their choice. This can be made possible by empowering young adults with tools and techniques which can help them identify their strengths, aspirations, and vest them with the ability to explore career choices and gain the necessary skills to make these transitions.

There is a need for a toolkit and a measure for young adults that will serve as guidance and direction to reach their career goals, a diagnostic tool that is easily understood and accepted.



The following section outlines one such option developed by Antarang and Adhyayan Foundation - the Career Readiness Diagnostic.

3. The Career Readiness Diagnostic: Enabling young adults to steer the boat

3.1 Purpose

The discourse around education in India has evolved over the last several decades with various tools having emerged to track student learning outcomes (like ASER and the National Achievement Survey) to the overall quality of schools (like Shaala Siddhi, School Education Quality Index and Performance Grading Index). Most recently in the new National Education Policy, 2020, there has been unanimous support for the establishment of the State School Standards Authority to measure the overall quality of schools continuously and to use data from that to determine what interventions are required to improve schools. Many of these tools are legitimised through government directives and are universally adopted to drive school improvement towards one vision of quality.

However, the gaping hole in the entire narrative around skilling in India is a non-existence of a shared and measurable vocabulary around what constitutes employability. Each intervention defines success in a different manner and rarely is this criteria understood by the stakeholder being served - the young adult.

Hence, in 2017, Antarang Foundation (AF) in collaboration with Adhyayan Quality Education Foundation (AQEF) decided to fill this gap through the **Career Readiness**

Diagnostic (CRD). The CRD is a diagnostic tool that enables young adults to gauge their current level of employability using evidence.

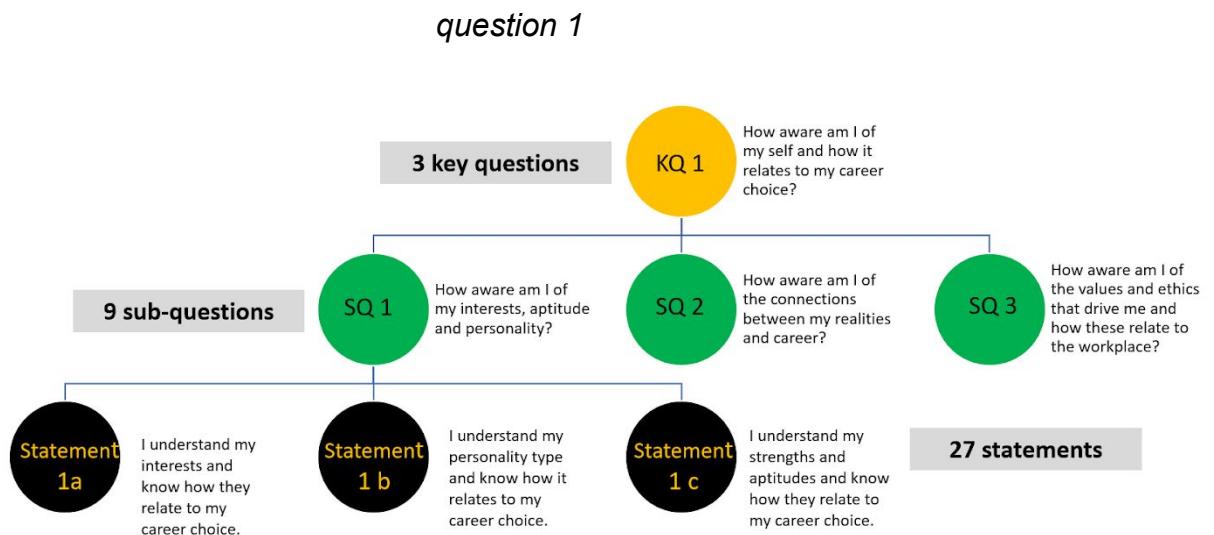
3.2 Structure

The tool is divided into 3 key questions:

- a) Self-awareness
- b) Career-awareness
- c) Skills and mindsets

Each key question consists of 3 sub-questions that focus on one concept around employability, which is further broken down into 3 impact-based statements.

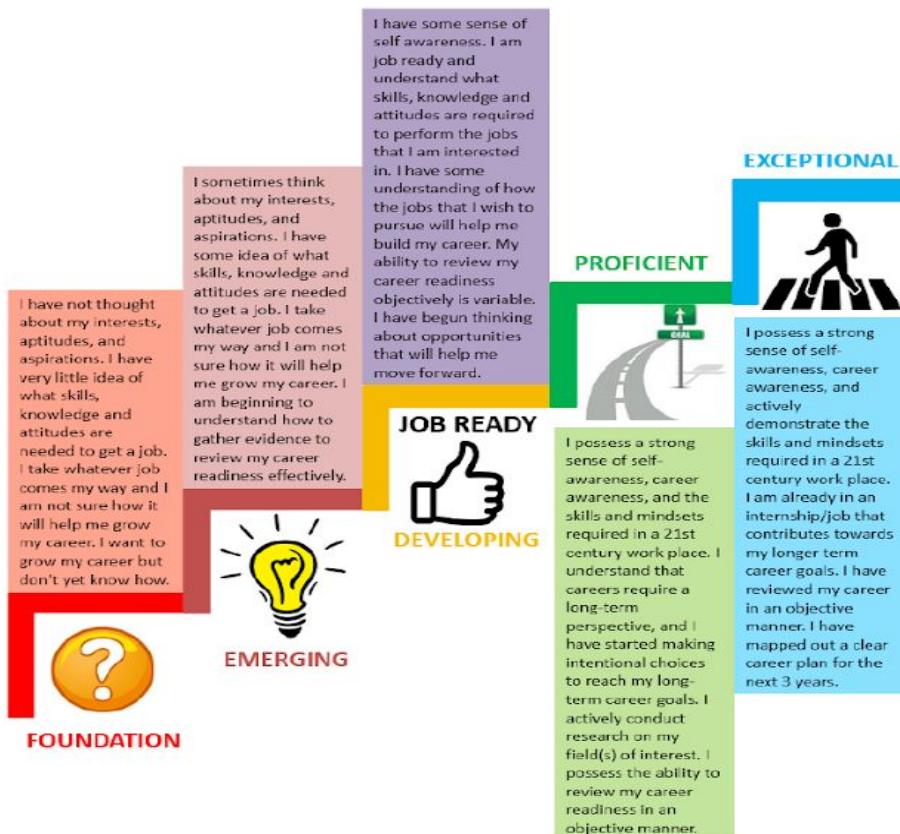
Figure 1: Structure of the career readiness diagnostic tool with an example of key



Each statement is rated on a 4-point scale of - Always, Mostly, Sometimes and Rarely. Once the rating by the young adults is completed, it is then validated by their trainer. Baseline and end line reviews are conducted to gauge progress.

At the end of the process the young adult receives a report card, providing them with their ratings as against that of their trainer, for each key question and sub-question. This creates room for dialogue to explore the difference in ratings and strengthen the understanding of the young adults of a particular employability concept.

Figure 2: Grade-definitions in the report card



The ratings are used for goal setting by the young adult to think of what areas they want to work on while celebrating their successes. Trainers are also provided with a student-wise comparative report that enables them to determine next steps for the batch they are teaching by highlighting areas of need and strengths.

3.3 Guiding principles and process

While designing this tool a few principles were considered to ensure that the young adults would have agency over the process.

3.3.1 Success criteria should be understood by and visible to all upfront

This diagnostic adheres to the principles of assessment for learning, which advocates the importance of success criteria that are understood by all, and against which performance is reviewed. Too often, assessments on the effectiveness of employability programs that are undertaken internally for monitoring and evaluation purposes, or undertaken externally by a third-party, only seek inputs from the end beneficiary - the young adult, but rarely involve them in the process of assessing their own progress. There is a veil between what the “beneficiary” needs to know and what the “service provider” is tracking and driving an intervention towards.

Being able to review one’s performance and reflect on evidence of where one stands in one’s journey towards employability, creates a sense of agency and ownership in the young adult. Hence, when the CRD was developed, it was important that the

diagnostic was designed for the young adult to be able to see the entire universe of employability and success criteria for each concept, and think of where they stand, so that they not only have a complete sense of what they would experience when enrolled in Antarang's Career Readiness Program, but also be partners in determining their journey forward.

3.3.2 Developmental in nature

Anyone who has worked with young adults, especially from under-served communities, knows that enabling them to understand the universe of employability and begin to take steps towards the same is a long journey due to the lack of mentors who can demystify the notion of employability, lack of exposure or knowledge about the space or the financial resources to pursue a career. Hence, this tool was designed to be developmental in nature. That is, clear expectations were set with trainers and young adults that if at first the concepts being discussed in this tool seemed alien, that was normal. The review process would enable them to understand what a particular concept meant and where they believed they stood in terms of their own rating. The rationale was that as they attended the Career Readiness Programs and enhanced their understanding of employability, their ability to rate evidence of their employability would also become more accurate.

As a 19-year old young adult shared, "In first diagnostic I was not sure what I really want to do in my career. The first time it made me think about how well I know myself, how much I have thought about my career and what I lack. As the Antarang lectures went along I slowly and steadily came to know about myself and learned

many things about myself. The end diagnostic then went well because I now understood and It made me feel like I am ready for my career."

For some young adults the journey towards becoming employable is smoother, while for others it is arduous, but the belief is that it is imperative that they begin to develop a shared language and understanding of employability as they upgrade their skills through evidence-based conversations and mentoring. Without that shared understanding, they run the risk of not being intentional about how to take their next steps and determine where they need support. This process takes time and is developmental.

As shared by one of the mentors who engages with Antarang's alumni, "The tool succinctly brings out areas of development as well as strengths in an objective report format. The tool sets out guidance with examples for expectations under each area of development. Once goals and activities were set under the identified categories, we periodically used guidance available in the tool to assess the extent of progress and identify any course correction to the activities and the approach. We were also able to identify any areas where progress was lagging, which served as input for work-in-progress for the future."

3.3.3 Youth aspirations should be at the center

Many tools that currently exist to measure employability tend to focus on skills such as interviewing, CV writing, collaboration, critical thinking and communication. While

these skills are a crucial element of employability, they lack the perspective on what it takes to build a long-term career, a key component of which is self-awareness.

Today, if one were to walk into tier two and three colleges and higher secondary schools in the country and ask student why they chose to pursue a certain stream, the response would be that “my parents made me”, “my friend was studying the same thing”, “I did not get good marks so ended up here by default.” In such a scenario it is imperative that young adults first start by understanding their own interests, aptitudes, aspirations as well as realities and barriers. Without the space to articulate what they want, no amount of skilling will result in young adults who are able to pursue long-term careers that they enjoy and can excel in.

Hence, the Career Readiness Diagnostic, was constructed in such a manner that while it addresses mainstream career readiness metrics such as the ability to interview well, having a professional CV, demonstrating critical thinking and collaboration, literacy and numeracy, among others; it also embeds questions that enable young adults to think about what their interests are, what their aspirations are, whether their values align with the careers they aspire to pursue, what barriers they face in pursuing careers and how they can overcome that, how they can seek reliable information on the latest trends in their industry, as well as whether they had created a backup plan for themselves. Therefore, ensuring that the aspirations and needs of the young adult are balanced with what industry demands.

3.4. Feedback and evolution

Over the course of the last three years more than 4000 young adults have undertaken the review. Through this period the tool has gone through three iterations and is currently on its fourth. The following questions have emerged and continue to be explored.

3.4.1 How does one balance rigour with simplicity?

The CRD consists of 27 statements in all with 4-5 pieces of evidence within the rubric for each rating (Always, Mostly, Sometimes, Rarely) for each statement. It takes nearly two hours to administer and can be extremely daunting for a young adult who has never had the opportunity to think about their employability in a holistic manner. While administering the review, oftentimes the trainers would find that as the review progressed the young adults would just begin to choose the “Rarely” and “Sometimes” column as there was no requirement to provide evidence and it was the easier option. Some young adults also struggled with the language due to low literacy levels and hence struggled to navigate the tool without support.

As one trainer shared, “We have a very diverse set of students, so some students were able to pick it up quickly while others found it frustrating to follow due to the difficulty of language.”

Through feedback from the young adults and their trainers, the language of the tool was simplified, more prompts were provided and the content was reduced keeping in

mind the main ideas under each statement. However, in order to not dilute the rigour of truly beginning to reflect on how employable one is, the length has not reduced significantly. Therefore ideas that are currently being explored are whether the baseline review can be made modular wherein each sub question is undertaken prior to the start of a particular session in the career readiness program. For example, the day the idea of interest mapping is being explored, the young adults rate themselves on the relevant statement in the diagnostic prior to the start of the session and their evidence for why they rated themselves in a particular manner is discussed before the trainer begins the topic. This way the young adult will be able to process each concept in smaller chunks, have a conversation to demonstrate their thinking and make a connection with the curriculum being delivered.

3.4.2 What does good evidence look like?

In the first two versions of the tool, young adults were provided with the rubric as well as one or two samples of what good evidence could look like.

However, it was found that during the baseline review, many young adults were either completely unfamiliar with the concepts (such as resilience, initiative, ethical conduct, personal and physical boundaries etc.) being reviewed or had a limited understanding of the same. Hence, having to think of evidence and write it out during the two hours of when the review was being administered was a challenge. Further, many young adults would feel impatient and would prefer to skip writing evidence to “get it over with”.

A 20- year old young adult from one of Antarnag's centres explained that, "The first time I took it I did not know what to type in the box as evidence. I could not think of anything."

A trainer echoed a similar sentiment, saying that, "As the whole diagnostic was new, we ourselves struggled with identifying what qualified as evidence for a particular statement and therefore struggled to guide students."

One of the alternatives that was suggested through rounds of feedback was that a drop down menu be provided or multiple choices be given so that the young adult could choose the evidence that suited them the most. However, the pitfall of that is it could become like any other multiple choice test, wherein a student could choose an option without much thought. The exercise of having to reflect on evidence of a concept from their own life compelled them to engage with the concept and begin to build their understanding of what employability means in practical terms as it relates to themselves.

Hence, as a happy medium, the alteration being considered in the upcoming iteration is a series of prompts with blanks that the young adult needs to fill. It provides direction through a set template, while maintaining room for the young adult to reflect on the evidence from their own lives.

3.4.3 How can the young adult be guided to process where they are in their journey without getting demotivated?

While administering a diagnostic of this nature where a young adult has to review their own career readiness level, one has to be cognisant of the fact that it requires the young adult to be vulnerable. Hence it is imperative that a safe space be created for that kind of vulnerability and honesty. Therefore, a lot of thought was put into the messaging prior to the administration of the review. Students were reassured that this was not a test with “pass” or “fail” grade and that at their age it was normal to be confused. They were encouraged to answer honestly so that they could be provided with the right kind of support through the course of Antarang’s Career Readiness Program. Further, they were given examples of young adults before them who had started out with a low score and then gone on to improve, which is what the Antarang curriculum promised to deliver.

Trainers were also supported in enabling the young adults to process their report card without feeling dejected by normalising lower end scores and extending support with empathy.

While the data shows that most students improve significantly, some who come from extremely tough circumstances show small shifts. However, the diagnostic has not been very successful at capturing these smaller shifts in the behaviour, attitude, skills and knowledge of the young adults. Hence, an ongoing conversation is around how one can celebrate the growth of those who are not able to show larger shifts against the diagnostic.

3.4.4 How does this not become just another data gathering exercise?

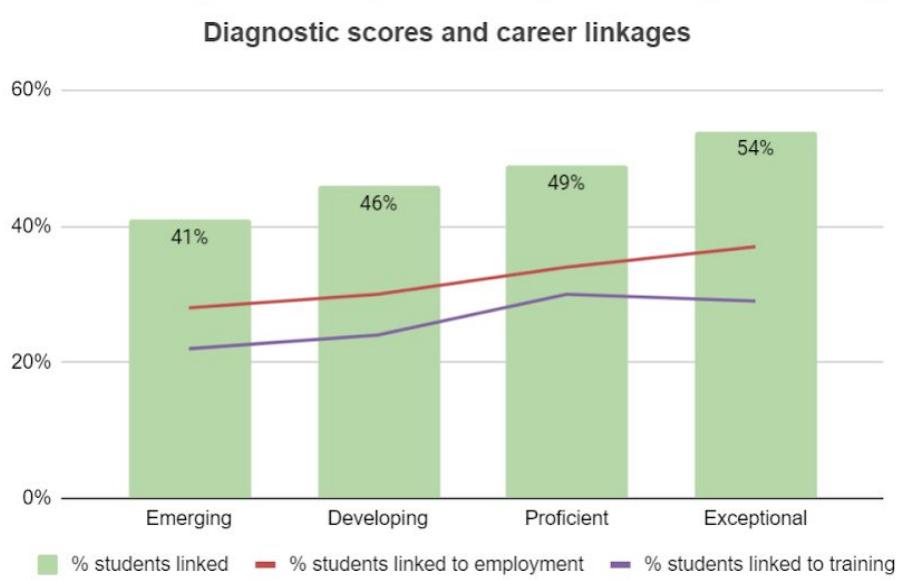
During the initial rounds of feedback with trainers a constant bone of contention was that this felt like just another administrative task wherein trainers had to sift through all this data and even enter it into the software platform in the communities where young adults did not have access to devices. Due to the length and the challenges many young adults faced during the baseline review, sometimes the purpose behind the review as a tool for reflection and dialogue on employability would get lost due to the administrative burden.

Hence, a lot of conversations were had to ensure that the administrative burden on trainers reduces. Also, to bring them back to the question of why this review exists and how it is meant to be used to facilitate an understanding of employability.

When asked how their understanding of the diagnostic has changed over a period of time, a trainer shared that “Initially it was more about looking at the baseline and endline and understanding if there has been a shift or not, but over time I have started to refer to the baseline reports during the program and have started having conversation with students. It gives me a good sense of what they are aware of and what they are good at, and address areas they need to improve on. It is very well-aligned to our curriculum and the larger idea of employability.”

3.5 Findings from the data

As can be seen from analysing the data across the past 3 years and for close to 2000 young adults who underwent the endline assessment, there is a positive correlation between diagnostic scores and career linkages for Antarang's alumni, hence establishing the predictive validity of the diagnostic.



Why this is significant is because the employability ecosystem is skewed towards the needs of industry, and this data counters the common wisdom that only by towing the line of industry career linkages are possible. The Career Readiness Diagnostic envisions metrics that are imperative for industry but grounds it in the context of young adults and their needs and aspirations. Thus, ensuring that industry finds the right talent and young adults pursue careers that matter to them.

4. The way forward

As the world of skilling and employability becomes increasingly complex, with the future of jobs being uncertain; and the need as highlighted in the National Education Policy 2020 for effective school to work transitions, it is crucial to account for three factors to shape this ecosystem:

4.1 The importance of a common language on employability: As each government body as well as NGO shapes its own metrics around what employability means, there are several disparate definitions of what constitutes employability. Unless there is an agreement on what employability is and what visible evidence of the same looks like, it will be next to impossible to move the needle on employability in a significant and sustainable manner. Hence, the career readiness diagnostic has been an attempt at starting a conversation on the need for that common language which is evidence-based.

4.2 The need for a youth-led employability ecosystem: An employability ecosystem that gives industry precedence over a young adult, runs the risk of ignoring youth aspirations and therefore may not emerge as the optimum solution to solving for the problem of an unengaged and unemployed youth. The career readiness diagnostic in a way tries to provide an answer for this imbalance in the employment equation by empowering the youth to start thinking about their aspirations and equipping them with the necessary framework to take onus of their journey to a more productive and fulfilling career.

4.3 Accredited cadre of career facilitators : While teaching credentials and qualifications are widely known and accepted, the employability ecosystem lacks accredited career facilitators who are crucial to delivering content and ensuring outcomes. The career facilitators need competence in facilitation along with an in-depth understanding of industry requirements from an employable candidate. Besides accreditation, a career pathway for facilitators is also required to encourage retention and motivation.

Today various UN bodies estimate that 24 million children will drop out of schools to earn money as a result of Covid (UNICEF, 2020a) and millions will be sucked into exploitative forms of work (UNICEF, 2020b). Now more than ever, we need to address the crisis of youth unemployability, with urgency and intentionality. Let youth aspirations not become the casualty of this pandemic.

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