

COMMENTARY

# Rich pickings in India for Singapore's education sector

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SINGAPORE is poised to become a Smart Nation and is leaving no stone unturned in this journey. Various projects for facilitating smart living are already underway. While the country is focusing on use of digital technology to improvise key elements such as transport, home, business, health and public services, it is also emphasising education and skills development to ensure its nationals are future-ready.

Singapore's education system is highly respected. Universities such as National University of Singapore and Nanyang Technological University feature at the top in global university rankings.

However, access to quality education and classroom learning may not always be enough to ensure employability and sustainability. Achieving skill mastery and continually upgrading individual learning and skills is critical in today's economic environment. Singapore has been quick to realise this and has been increasing its focus on imparting skills of the future to its people.

The SkillsFuture initiative launched by the tripartite Council for Skills, Innovation and Productivity (CSIP) is a good example. It aims to combine education, training, and career progression for people in all walks and stages of life. Many polytechnics and educational institutes have also started focusing on structured learning and experience-based education as a step towards skills development. These steps not only help the economy, but also inculcate a culture of innovation and excellence.

While such skills development programmes benefit Singaporeans, there exists a huge opportunity for Singapore and its education institutes to become global providers of skills education and development.

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One immediate beneficiary could be India. With the world's largest young population and its ambition to become a truly global economic superpower, India desperately needs all the help it can get in skilling its people.

Singapore and India have always shared deep cultural, commercial and political ties. The availability of top-notch education institutes and skills development courses in Singapore contrasts with India's vast population and lack of quality education and institutes. India has realised the importance of skills development and has launched an ambitious mission for this.

The country has a number of priorities but lacks resources to tackle these head-on. Skills development is a critical component of India's future and it requires massive resources and know-how. This gap in resources can be filled in by Singapore and its institutes, who could consider strategic partnerships with Indian institutes or provide independent skills and education services in the country. The Indian government welcomes private and foreign participation in skills development and is willing to extend state support as well.

Before entering the Indian market, it is important to understand the regulatory framework of the education sector in the country. The higher-education sector in India can be broadly categorised under "regulated" and "unregulated". Degree and diploma programmes are regulated; test preps, certificate courses, skills development programmes and tutorials are largely unregulated.

Foreign investment of 100 per cent is permitted under the automatic route in the education sector in India. In the unregulated space, such as skills development certificate courses, for-profit entities are permitted.

India currently does not allow foreign universities to set up independent campuses to offer degree or diploma programmes. However, collaborations with Indian institutes sanctioned by the regulators in India are permissible. While the regulated space has its share of activity, it is the unregulated sector which offers an array of opportunities for a foreign education provider.

## **UNDER THE REGULATORY NET**

Firstly, it is possible to set up education institutes offering certificate programmes in most states in the country without obtaining any regulatory approvals. Since most skills development programmes are certificate courses, they are not under the regulatory net.

Those looking at local support will find that collaboration in the unregulated sector is the way to go. This happens by way of a foreign institute granting a licence of its brand, curriculum and know-how to the Indian institute.

The Indian institute provides the courses, and a certificate of completion is issued to the student by the foreign institute upon completion of the programme. At times, services such as teacher training, curriculum development, branding and marketing assistance are also provided by the foreign institute to the Indian institute.

This model not only earns the foreign institute royalties and service fees, but also helps it to establish its brand and presence in India; the Indian institute benefits from the use of the brand name and curriculum of the foreign institute. The result is a win-win for both players.

Since skills development is essentially focused on practical training, it is important for tutors to have the necessary know-how and skill set as well. Training institutes, especially for teachers, are thus another area of interest for foreign skills development providers.

Like in Singapore, technology upgrading is high on India's agenda as well. India is also proving to be a good market for launching tech-based tools for educators and students. SMART boards are becoming commonplace; the trend of gamification in education is becoming popular and is now regarded as a great learning facilitator. In fact, many schools are moving towards blended or flipped learning models to take advantage of technology in learning.

Technology is also instrumental for setting up "low-cost schools", which are aimed at educating children from the lower-income segments of society. The state governments are also supportive of such edu-social initiatives and are providing incentives and concessions to such education providers.

India is an attractive market for Singapore education institutes and companies looking to expand globally. There is also a proposal to allow foreign universities to establish their campuses in India and to further liberalise the higher education regulatory environment. This will also ease doing business in the education sector in the country and increase cross-border collaborations.

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