



How can corporate scholarship programs help disadvantaged students

Nearly 1.5 crore students graduate class 10 each year in India. The Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) data indicates that around nine million students enroll in undergraduate courses each year. The gap of 60 lakhs could be a combination of students who fail to clear class 12 and students who drop out after both Class 10 and 12, due to their inability to fund studies. Even if an equal weight-age is attributed to these two factors, there are potentially 30 lakh children who dropout due to paucity of funds.

There is clearly a need to incentivize and assist lakhs of bright students from underprivileged backgrounds to pursue higher studies, help them increase their family incomes and contribute to the economic output of the country.

Scholarship programs is one way in which many corporates and high net worth individuals (HNIs) have been supporting children in realizing their professional dreams.

Various scholarship programs have also played a significant role in encouraging girl students to continue their education. Designing an effective scholarship program, therefore, is key to ensuring that our next generation has access to best quality of education and develops the mindset and transferable skills to find and sustain meaningful work in a transformative age.

BASIC INGREDIENTS

Income threshold, type of schools, kind of courses and the scale of the program are some of the most important factors to consider while instituting scholarships. Organizations operate with different benchmarks, such as working with families earning an annual income ranging from INR 72,000 to INR 3 lakhs.

They choose from either government schools, low-cost private schools or focus exclusively on students from English medium schools.

While most programs are designed to help students complete their graduation, a few organizations in India are also awarding scholarships to outstanding students to study abroad. Lastly, reach of the program is an important aspect -tight filters in some of the above factors can result in a much smaller scale of the program.

BUILDING ON THE ESSENTIALS: ENHANCING EMPLOYABILITY

Being one of the youngest countries in the world, India has millions of people joining the workforce every year. Forecasts suggest the country is expected to have a billion-strong working age population by 2027. In this milieu, enabling access to quality education is only half the battle.

Students need to be empowered with employability skills and scholarship programs should be centered on benefit-ting the students in the long-term. I summarize a few purposeful actions organizations can take while crafting their scholarship programs:

- a) Financial support by itself is not enough: Students from financially deprived backgrounds often do not have a clear understanding of the level of competition they must face to gain admissions into professional courses, be it Engineering, Medicine or Chartered Accountancy. A career counselling session can prove particularly helpful in opening the minds of these students.
- b) Soft skills: Students from economically weaker backgrounds can find transition to college difficult since they have to interact with students from privileged families. Soft-skills training focused on communications, creative thinking, problem solving, teambuilding immediately after class 10 exams can be valuable to prepare students for college. E Y, for example, conducts a workshop for its shortlisted candidates that helps assess motivation levels of

students and their level of dedication to continue further studies. Students who attend at least three out of the four sessions are considered for a scholarship (with adequate justification for the others to be considered).

- c) English communication: English language proficiency is a significant challenge for students studying in vernacular mediums. Since higher studies are invariably in English, students find it quite hard to cope. Inability to speak in English not only affects their academic performance but also results in loss of self-confidence. Hence, English communication training modules are important for students not only for higher education but also for aiding future employment.
- d) Mentoring, resume and interview preparation: Conducting mock interviews for students in their final year can be another method to hone speaking and presentation abilities of the students.

At EY, we have involved our employees to provide tips on preparation of resumes and other mentoring, which scholars have found extremely relevant and useful. Similarly, getting students to shadow employees for a day has helped students gain a better understanding of how organizations work and helped them develop the right mindset to appear for interviews and integrate into a working environment. A well-designed scholarship program can not only maximize student's learning but can also enable greater scope and reach of the program.

For instance, we learnt that banks prefer to extend educational loans to children from well-to-do families, since the poor neither have adequate assets to mortgage nor a steady income. There is an opportunity for corporates to explore the options of acting as a guarantor for educational loans (First Loss Deposit Guarantor (FLDG)) or exercise the pay-forward option, allowing flexibility beyond providing direct grants. This way, they can support many more deserving students and effectively scale their scholarship initiatives.

While the scholarship pool has been rising each year, in my view, we have only scratched the surface. This space needs a lot more innovation and collaboration so that most, if not all, students from less privileged backgrounds have an equal opportunity to higher education and more importantly, are prepared for the working world. Else, the ambition of realizing India's demographic dividend will remain elusive.

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