

Bridging the Skills Divide: A Comparative Study of Skill-Based Education Across SAARC Countries with a Policy Roadmap for Pakistan

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Abstract

The SAARC countries heavily rely on skill-based education, which serves as their key resource for developing their workforce and advancing economic growth and sustainable development. The research examines skill-based education approaches throughout South Asia by studying how Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka implement their educational strategies and encounter challenges. This paper analyzes regional and national TVET policies alongside education reform initiatives, academic publications, and global successes through a qualitative document-based research approach to reveal trends and discrepancies across vocational and technical education. A study of regional vocational education shows that most nations struggle with outdated education content, training deficiencies, inadequate facilities, and insufficient industrial-academic partnerships, as well as traditional barriers to teaching practical skills. National skill missions and digital education reforms are implemented on a large scale in India and Sri Lanka, while structural barriers hinder Afghanistan and Bhutan from making significant progress. The research indicates that Pakistan faces substantial barriers in its policy coordination, physical training programs, and public-private delivery approaches for education. An action plan based on regional examples recommends how Pakistan should enhance its vocational education and increase technical skills by implementing specified measures, such as specifying contemporary curricula, developing teaching expertise, utilizing industry connections, and providing universal program accessibility. A focus exists on specifying contemporary curricula, developing teaching expertise, using industry connections, and providing universal program accessibility. The study contributes to regional educational discourse while providing South Asian nations with a comprehensive strategy for integrating their skill development plans with worldwide employment requirements. Policymakers, educators, and researchers involved in education reform, youth employability strategies, and the development of the world's economic transformation should review this paper.

Keywords: Skill-Based Education, Vocational Training, SAARC, Educational Policy, Workforce Development, Pakistan, Technical Education, Public-Private Partnerships

Introduction

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) groups Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka as countries with both substantial economic power and enduring obstacles to educational success and skill building (Dayal&Dayal, 2016; Rizwan&Sohail, 2024). Several SAARC members have achieved

economic development, but their youth lacks contemporary workplace skills, intensifying job search challenges (Shabbir, 2018). Educational institutions must prioritize skill-based education that teaches vocational skills and technology competencies to bridge the skills gap that challenges regional development and inclusive progress (Kumar & Hooda, 2024). The substantial number of uneducated students in Pakistan, coupled with poor learning achievements, requires immediate implementation of effective skill-based education policies because approximately 22 million children do not attend school (Ahmad et al., 2014). This research evaluates the skill-based education structures of SAARC nations by analyzing educational curriculums, institutional mechanisms, and alignment of business sector requirements. It studies regional best practices and challenges to create a policy framework to help Pakistan improve its skill development system. This study provides valuable information for evidence-based reforms that support socioeconomic development and regional cooperation through quality educational systems related to Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) outlined by UNESCO in 2021.

Skill-Based Education in SAARC Countries

The nations in SAARC recognize skill-based education that combines vocational and technical training as a key instrument for socioeconomic growth. The study by Munsir et al. (2014) evaluated life skills education in teacher training curricula across SAARC countries to discover that India and Sri Lanka integrated soft skills, particularly critical thinking and communication, better than Pakistan and Afghanistan. The implementation lacks consistency, according to the authors, who observe how resource limitations prevent the expansion of these programs within Bhutan and Maldives. The Federal Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship in India launched the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana initiative to train 400 million workers in 2022 (Kumar & Hooda, 2024). Skills development in Pakistan is a fragmented system that depends on external donor support while showing minimal control from within the nation (Khan, 2018). According to Mannan (2024), in his study on efficient model development, Bangladesh has progressed in vocational education because of public-private alliances, which produce better enrollments in technical education institutions versus Pakistan's declining vocational training sector.

Challenges in Skill Development

According to existing literature, multiple obstacles prevent skill-based education from being effective throughout the SAARC region. The education systems across South Asia remain unready for global talent requirements because their curricula require updating, and teacher training lacks sufficient funding, according to Khilji and Keilson (2014). Ahmad et al. (2014) explain that Pakistani education suffers from two significant issues: students who enrol in classes still show poor learning outcomes. Numerous primary students fail to meet basic reading and mathematics standards according to the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), which prevents them from succeeding in vocational programs. Technological integration also poses challenges. According to Feroz and Yasmin (2021), the education system in Pakistan faces challenges with implementing educational technology, which affects the provision of modern skill training tools, mainly in rural areas. India's digital education program contains online skill platforms that extend accessibility, but Kumar and Hooda (2024) mentioned problems related to digital disparity. The digital gap across the SAARC region worsens social inequalities because India and Sri Lanka have stronger technological capabilities than Nepal and Afghanistan (Kaba & Said, 2014).

Policy and Institutional Frameworks

Creating effective policy frameworks is essential to closing the skills imbalance. According to the Asia-Pacific Regional Roadmap (2015–2030) published by UNESCO (2021), nations should work together to coordinate education priorities with SDG 4 targets. The SAARC countries have adopted sub-regional plans to improve vocational education, but their implementation rates differ. India operates a structured national skill development program, while Pakistan fails to coordinate its educational initiatives with inadequate financial support (Shabbir, 2018). Studies conducted by Liyanage et al. (2024) show that Sri Lanka's vocational education receives support from active connections between education and industry, which leads to the relevant curriculum. The vocational programs in Pakistan struggle to address industry needs, and as a result, youth joblessness continues to increase (Begum, 2022). The research supports stakeholder participation through collaborative industry and community members who should develop curricula aligned with market requirements (Ali et al., 2024).

Gaps and Opportunities

Research shows a significant absence in studies focusing on skill-based education across every member nation within the SAARC organization. Few research studies combine regional trends to generate cross-country learning, but studies analyze each country separately (Munsi et al., 2014). Limited research exists about policy roadmaps that specifically suit Pakistan's socioeconomic characteristics while maintaining its regional strategic position (Shabbir, 2018). The proposal by UNESCO (2021) highlights the need for regional collaboration, which could enable member states to exchange successful practices and find solutions for trainer development alongside inadequacies in educational premises. The research develops yet existing scholarship through its thorough assessment of SAARC nations' skill-based educational systems and recommends operational policies for Pakistani education. It focuses on filling essential gaps in curriculum alignment, technological integration, and institutional coordination to advance South Asian inclusive, sustainable development discussions. Knowledge economies have increased the importance of skill-based education (SBE), mainly when workforce development drives economic changes in targeted regions. The member countries within the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) have launched different vocational and technical education policies, programs, and institutional transformation initiatives throughout South Asia. Countries within the region maintain a continuous mismatch between their educational institutions' production and market requirements. The education sector faces multiple essential difficulties because curriculums are outdated, infrastructure is poor, teacher training techniques are lacking, and public-private connections remain weak. Pakistan faces an important point where decisions need to be made. Implementing the National Skills Strategy (2017–2025) and National Vocational and Technical Training Commission (NAVTTTC) programs has slowed because of structural, cultural and resource-based limitations. The national approach of Pakistan can gain precision through knowledge from other countries in the region that have pursued digital education in Sri Lanka, entrepreneurship coaching in Bhutan, and large-scale vocational instruction in India. To direct this investigation, the present study is driven by the following research questions:

Research Questions

1. What are the key policies and strategies adopted by SAARC countries to promote skill-based education, and how do they compare across the region?
2. What are the major challenges affecting the implementation and effectiveness of skill-based education in South Asia?
3. How can Pakistan reform its skill-based education system by learning from successful models and practices in other SAARC countries?

Objectives of the Study

1. To conduct a comparative analysis of skill-based education policies, initiatives, and implementation frameworks across SAARC countries.
2. To examine the major systemic and contextual challenges affecting vocational and technical education in the region.
3. To develop policy-oriented recommendations for improving skill-based education in Pakistan, drawing insights from regional best practices.

Methodology

Research Design

The research adopted qualitative CDA methodology for investigating policy documentation on skill-based education in South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation member states while exploring their strategies and respective challenges. This design uses descriptive and interpretive methods to discover frequent patterns and assess policy gaps with contextual variations across member nations, as confirmed by Sharma (2018), Bhatnagar (2020), and Dendup&Onthanee (2020). The research design followed principles from comparative education research to build its structure, which emphasized obtaining policy reform lessons for Pakistan.

Data Sources and Collection

This research integrated secondary evidence from national policy documents with technical education strategies, academic publications, and institutional reports. The primary data employed for this study included the National Skills Development Policy of Afghanistan (Safi et al., 2018), the TVET Policy 2018 of Bangladesh (Rahman et al., 2019) and the Skill India Mission from India (Kamdar, 2017; Mahapatra&Satapathy, 2016) together with the CTEVT framework of Nepal (Basnet &Pyakurel, 2023). The analysis included reports from UNESCO, the World Bank, ILO, and other international organizations. Material selection involved evaluating their appropriateness to the study, their currency and genuine policy content, and their support of research goals. Documents published between 2010 and 2023 received preference. Over 35 peer-reviewed articles, official documents, and policy reports were reviewed between 2010 and 2023 in the eight SAARC countries.

Data Analysis Procedure

A thematic content analysis approach was employed to interpret the data. The study identified three main domains for comparison:

1. **Policy and Strategic Frameworks:** including national policies and skill enhancement missions (e.g., Sharma, 2023; Jayawardana& O'Donnell, 2007).
2. **Implementation Mechanisms:** including institutional support, public-private partnerships, and TVET systems (e.g., Lysetty et al., 2022; Alam&Dhamija, 2022).
3. **Systemic Challenges:** such as infrastructure limitations, language barriers, curriculum-market misalignment, and teacher readiness (e.g., Afrin, 2016; Newaz et al., 2013; Nasir et al., 2022).

Individual analysis of each country occurred before a comparative matrix was applied for cross-country evaluation (see Table 1 in results). An analysis of recurring themes was performed by coding method while categorizing based on policy impacts.

Ethical Considerations

The study relied solely on publicly accessible policy documents and academic writing, which made it eligible for exemption from institutional review board protocols. The investigation maintained academic standards by accurately citing sources, displaying respect for all presented perspectives, and properly attributing materials.

Limitations

According to Welch and Wahidyar (2019), the research faces restrictions when attempting to access policy documents, particularly those issued by unstable nations, including Afghanistan. Document-based interpretation represents the main analysis approach because the study lacks firsthand data from interviews with education stakeholders or policymakers. Future research should implement mixed methods because they help gather comprehensive real-time reports from stakeholders (Devkota, 2021; Chogyel et al., 2021).

Results and Discussion

Comparative Skill-Based Education Landscape in SAARC Countries

The SAARC nations employ multiple policies and strategies to advance education that focuses on skills development throughout the region. The eight SAARC countries exhibit different skill-based education policies along with their associated initiatives and facing challenges as shown in Table 1.

Table 2. 1: Skill-Based Education: Comparative Table of SAARC Countries

Sr. No.	Country	Skill-based education policies	Initiatives to promote skill-based education	Challenges
1	Afghanistan	National Development Policy (2019)	Afghanistan Skills Development Program (ASDP)	Lack of resources, security challenges, high illiteracy rate
2	Bangladesh	Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Policy (2018)	National Skills Development Policy (2017)	Lack of skilled instructors, mismatch between skills training and job market needs
3	Bhutan	Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Policy (2018)	Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Strategy (2016-2025)	Lack of resources, limited access to TVET institutions
4	India	National Policy on Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (2015)	Skill India Mission	Lack of skilled instructors, mismatch between skills training and job market needs
5	Maldives	Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Policy (2019)	Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Strategy (2020-2025)	Lack of resources, limited access to TVET institutions
6	Nepal	Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Policy (2012)	Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Strategy (2017-2022)	Lack of resources, mismatch between skills training and job market needs
7	Pakistan	National Development Policy (2017)	National Skills Strategy (2017-2025)	Lack of resources, mismatch between skills training and job market needs
8	Sri Lanka	National Development Policy (2019)	National Skills Development Strategy (2019-2024)	Lack of resources, mismatch between skills training and job market needs

Table 1 presents a summary that identifies essential factors which determine the effectiveness of skill-based education throughout SAARC nations. Each nation demonstrates dedication by establishing official policies and strategic plans; however, significant obstacles persist in training teachers, building infrastructure, developing curricula, and applying skills in the job market.

India: Industry-Academic Mismatch and Curriculum Gaps

India has introduced high-impact initiatives such as the Skill India Mission and incorporated skill training into upper education. Still, research (Bhatnagar, 2020; Sharma, 2018) highlights serious deficiencies in soft skills and employability preparation. Problems include inconsistent private sector engagement and a requirement for curriculum overhaul in technical and MBA courses.

Bangladesh: Language Barriers and Weak Implementation

Bangladesh has adopted policies for technical and vocational education and training, as well as national skill development. Still, challenges such as poor English skills (Afrin, 2016) and inadequate teaching methods affect students' preparedness. It is recommended that working together among stakeholders is crucial for effective implementation (Naziz, 2019).

Sri Lanka: Digital Education and Reform Initiatives

Sri Lanka demonstrates potential with improvements in digital skills, job training, and workforce growth (Karunanayaka&Weerakoon, 2020). Nonetheless, the lingering effects of colonial history and unequal distribution of resources continue to impact access for rural areas and fairness in opportunities.

Maldives: Teacher Capacity and Quality Assurance

Even with the focus on policy, the Maldives struggles with issues in teacher training, inadequate physical facilities, and difficulties in implementing new teaching methods (Sodiq&Biase, 2022). Furthermore, the absence of a strong quality assurance system also restricts long-term development.

Bhutan: Rote Learning and ICT Gaps

Bhutan is moving away from teaching, which heavily focuses on memorization, and instead embracing education, which is focused on entrepreneurship and integrating information and communication technology. However, there are still significant obstacles, such as gaps in infrastructure and the conflict between adopting Western practices and preserving cultural identity (Wangdi, 2022; Sharma, 2023).

Nepal: Multimodal Skill Delivery

Nepal demonstrates its adaptable approach to education by offering formal, non-formal, and informal methods (Lamsal&Bajracharya, 2022). Nevertheless, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed significant disparities in access to technology and remote learning (Devkota, 2021).

Afghanistan: Gender Barriers and Curriculum Reform

The situation of skill development in Afghanistan is heavily influenced by ongoing social and political unrest. Research indicates that there are critical requirements in areas such as training for healthcare, updating of textbooks, and encouraging the participation of women (Ansari et al., 2015; Rahim, 2021). The concept of Education 5.0 presents an innovative answer for the future.

The Pakistani Context: Complex Challenges and Comparative Lessons

The existing SBE policies in Pakistan, such as the National Skills Strategy for 2017 to 2025, aim high but face challenges with poor governance, insufficient funding for infrastructure, and traditional teaching methods. There is little partnership with industry, unlike in India or the UK. Analyzing global frameworks points to several areas where reforms could benefit Pakistan:

- **Policy Coherence:** Streamlining governance bodies and harmonizing federal-provincial implementation.
- **Public-Private Partnerships:** Engaging industries in curriculum development and apprenticeship models.
- **Teacher Development:** Upgrading technical teacher training and incentivizing retention.
- **Cultural Shifts:** Reframing vocational education as a respectable and rewarding pathway.
- **Equity and Access:** Targeting marginalized groups and rural communities through blended learning.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The analysis shows that skill-based education is decisive in stimulating South Asia's inclusive economic growth system. The member states of SAARC experience individual situations yet deal with similar issues regarding training mismatches, inadequate infrastructure systems, and weak teacher competency levels. For Pakistan to advance, it needs to execute multi-sectoral reforms using the best regional practices and invest in flexible skill ecosystems promoting inclusion. A strategic policy approach focusing on curriculum design based on employment needs will transform Pakistan into an economically competitive, knowledge-driven economy. Such policies should combine coordination between stakeholders and flexible delivery platforms.

Conflict of interest

It is declared that there is no conflict of interest.

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