

PERCEPTION OF EMPLOYERS RELATED TO EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS AND ITS SUPPORT PROVIDED THROUGH COLLEGES TO BUILD THE SAME

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Abstract

Employability skills are an increasingly influential factor in the success of a graduate in the labor market. The graduates' market is always competitive, and employers are looking for one whose competence is manifested not only through technical knowledge but also through soft skills such as effective communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and being adaptive. This is where this study sought to understand what employability skills recent graduates are perceived to have by employers and how colleges support college ethos in fostering the skills. The subjects of the study anchor academic training to the alignment of market needs through qualitative research based on the interviews with the employers in respective sectors. The study uses judgmental sampling in the selection of interviewees to ensure the participation of employers with vast experience in recent graduate hiring to provide relevant insights into the effectiveness of college programs to build employability skills in demand. This will give the gaps between the expectations of the employers and what the colleges are offering, thus identifying how educational institutions can better support of students entering the workforce. The findings of this study contribute to the ongoing debate on the changing role of colleges in equipping learners with the competencies required in the modern labor market and provide practical advice to colleges on how best to enhance their programs, which are increasingly focused on employability.

Keywords: Employability Skills, Employers Perception, College Support, Graduate Preparedness, Labor Market

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1. Introduction:

Employability has quickly become the eye of the storm in higher education and industry due to the changing nature of the job market globally. What is now expected is that any graduate not only needs to have acquired technical knowledge but also a host of soft skills that will see them adapt to and thrive in a different kind of work environment. Employability is now seen by employers as a composite concept of skills, competencies, and attributes that graduates should be able to demonstrate in order for them to have some possibility of securing and then sustaining employment. The purpose of this study is to explore the disconnect between higher education

institutions and the employability of graduates in India. According to the Economic Times (2023), over 65% of Indian graduates are considered unemployable due to a lack of industry-relevant skills. The Education to Employment report (2021) reveals that nearly 70% of employers feel that fresh graduates are underprepared for the workforce, with insufficient exposure to practical applications. A report by AICTE (2022) found that only 40% of engineering graduates secure placements, with most institutions failing to provide sufficient internships or industry tie-ups. The National Employability Report (2021) highlights that less than 45% of students in tier-2 and tier-3 colleges have access to skill development programs, further emphasizing the lack of practical training. The Confederation of Indian Industry (2021) reported that colleges often focus heavily on theoretical knowledge, resulting in a skills gap that impedes students' ability to secure employment in sectors like IT, manufacturing, and services. Employers increasingly report that graduates lack critical soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving, all of which are essential in modern workplaces. Furthermore, fewer than 30% of Indian colleges offer career guidance services, and only 20% have effective placement cells that can actively connect students with job opportunities. Many institutions update their curricula infrequently, failing to keep pace with evolving industry demands, contributing to an alarming gap between academic output and employability outcomes. Consequently, this study seeks to analyze these factors and suggest actionable steps to bridge the gap between education and employment readiness. This change in emphasis brings into sharper focus the question of how far colleges actually prepare students for the demands of the real world in the labor market. In fact, from the point of view of the employers, employability skills like communication, critical thinking, leadership, and adaptability are as much necessary as academic qualifications. Many employers lament that there is a growing chasm between what educational institutes teach and what is required to excel in professional life. This gap quite often translates into a loss for both the employer and the graduate, who may not get a proper job despite his academic credentials. Although the colleges have been more focused on academic attainment and technical skills, soft skills have always seemed somewhat underrated in the employability equation. Many, therefore, respond to the growing demand for well-rounded graduates by introducing employability skills training into their curricula. But the effectiveness varies from one institution to another. Even with such efforts, many employers often report dissatisfaction with the sets of skills new graduates have, thereby suggesting that more needs to be done to bridge this gap. However, due to globalization, technology, and economic changes, the workplace has only become more complex. In particular, the Automation and Artificial Intelligence waves have stipulated that graduates be trained with skills less easily replicable by machines, such as creativity, emotional intelligence, and collaboration. The employers look more and more for graduates who could function amidst these complexities and contribute to the lasting success of their organizations. The role of the colleges about developing employability skills is multi-dimensional from an academic point of view. Colleges, apart from the regular classroom teaching, get actively involved in developing these competencies through extracurricular activities, internships, and industry collaborations. A greater challenge before the colleges is to design the curriculum that would bring a balance between theoretical knowledge and practical skill development. Programs aimed at enhancing employability mostly include the components of career counseling, workshops on resume building and interview techniques, and networking opportunities with industry professionals. While some HEIs have made reasonable headway in this respect, others have been much slower. This result is an inconsistency in graduate preparedness entering the workforce and, hence, a varied perception by the employing organizations. This disparity underlines the need for a more systematic approach

to the integration of employability skills into higher education. It further calls for a closer link between colleges and industry to provide courses that better meet the needs of the labor market. Furthermore, employability does not mean merely getting a job but involves long-term successful career building and adaptability in a constantly changing job market. Hence, colleges need to equip students not only with skills for their first jobs but also with lifelong learning capabilities and competencies to help them navigate multiple career changes. This view hence underscores building resilience, adaptability, and a growth mindset in students. This study seeks to explore the perceptions of employers regarding the employability skills of recent graduates and the role of colleges in supporting the development of these skills. By focusing on qualitative interviews with employers, the research aims to gain a deeper understanding of the expectations employers have of graduates and how well colleges are meeting these expectations. The findings will provide insights into the effectiveness of current educational practices and identify areas where improvements are needed. Ultimately, the goal is to contribute to the ongoing conversation about how colleges can better prepare students for the demands of the modern workforce.

2. Gap Analysis:

While numerous studies have extensively explored the importance of key employability skills such as communication, critical thinking, and teamwork, there is a significant gap in the literature regarding the execution and effectiveness of college-led initiatives aimed at fostering these skills. Most research emphasizes the development of abilities that employers seek but does not examine how institutions are practically bridging this gap through structured programs, on-the-job training, industry tie-ups, or curriculum redesign. Furthermore, the existing studies often neglect the assessment of real-world outcomes from these initiatives, leaving a critical disconnect between theoretical skill development and the actual preparedness of graduates for the workforce. This gap calls for a deeper investigation into the operational aspects of academic interventions and their tangible impact on graduate employability.

2.1 Literature Review:

- **Harvey's (2001) 'Defining and Measuring Employability'** research focuses on defining employability, emphasizing key skills such as communication, problem-solving, and teamwork. The paper critiques the disconnection between graduates' skills and employers' expectations, but it does not consider the role of colleges in addressing this gap through specialized programs, practical training, or curriculum adjustments.
- **Andrews and Higson (2008) 'Graduate Employability, 'Soft Skills' Versus 'Hard' Business Knowledge'** examine the importance of soft and hard skills among business graduates in Europe. While the paper stresses the importance of skills like leadership and communication, it lacks any substantial discussion on the role of academic institutions in fostering these skills through specific initiatives such as incubators or partnerships with industries.
- **Jackson (2013) 'Business Graduate Employability – Where Are We Going Wrong?'** highlights the mismatch between business graduates' competencies and employers' requirements, especially in areas such as interpersonal skills and problem-solving. However, the study does not investigate the initiatives colleges might take to equip graduates with these skills, limiting the focus to the skills themselves rather than the support provided by colleges to enhance them.
- **Tomlinson's (2008) 'The Degree is Not Enough': Students' Perceptions of the Role of Higher Education Credentials for Graduate Work and Employability'** study focuses on students' perceptions of employability and how a degree alone does not prepare them for the job

market. The paper emphasizes employability skills but does not delve into the initiatives or support mechanisms that colleges can offer to enhance students' readiness for the workforce.

- **Yorke and Knight's (2004) 'Embedding Employability into the Curriculum'** research offers insight into embedding employability into the curriculum, primarily focusing on specific skillsets like self-management and critical thinking. However, the study does not explore how institutions can implement practical initiatives, such as job placements, incubator centers, or industry-oriented workshops, to support students.

- **Cranmer (2006) 'Enhancing Graduate Employability: Best Intentions and Mixed Outcomes'** analyzes the effectiveness of employer engagement and skills development initiatives. While the paper acknowledges the need for improved graduate employability skills, it does not consider the strategic role that colleges can play in building these skills through career guidance, hands-on experience, or stronger ties with industries.

- **Bridgstock's (2009) 'The Graduate Attributes We've Overlooked: Enhancing Graduate Employability through Career Management Skills'** work explores the importance of career management skills as a component of employability. Although it highlights the value of skills, the paper does not address how academic institutions can contribute to career preparedness through structured programs or by incorporating practical applications into the curriculum.

- **Tymon's (2013) 'The Student Perspective on Employability'** study examines students' perceptions of employability and their understanding of the skills required in the job market. However, like other research, this paper does not consider how colleges might improve students' employability through targeted initiatives such as industry tie-ups, soft skill workshops, or start-up curriculum integration.

- **Wilton (2011) 'The Shifting Graduate Labor Market: Implications for Higher Education'** discusses the evolving demands of the graduate labour market, highlighting the need for adaptability, digital skills, and lifelong learning. However, the paper does not delve into how higher education institutions are supporting students through practical experiences like internships, workshops, or entrepreneurship programs that directly address these changing requirements.

- **Pegg, A., Waldock, J., Hendy-Isaac, S., & Lawton, R.'s (2012) 'Pedagogy for Employability'** paper focuses on pedagogy and the development of employability skills, particularly within the framework of higher education. However, it fails to analyze the proactive measures that colleges can take to improve employment outcomes for graduates, such as structured placements, career guidance programs, or industry-specific training

3. Objectives of the Study:

- To explore employers' perceptions of the employability skills demonstrated by fresh graduates.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of college programs in preparing students for the labor market.
- To identify the requirement of program initiatives by the college that employers prioritize when hiring graduates.
- To assess the alignment between college curricula and employer expectations regarding employability.
- To provide recommendations for colleges to enhance their support for employability skills development.

3.1 Hypothesis:

Alternate Hypothesis (H1) – There is a significant relationship between the college initiatives and employability of students after graduation.

Null Hypothesis (H0) – There is no relationship between the initiatives of college and employability of students after graduation.

Alternate Hypothesis (H2) - To analyze the survey data of employers perception and college initiatives using SWOT factors.

3.2 Scope of the Study:

- Future studies may consider adopting a mixed-methods approach: quantitative surveys of personal perception of Youth and Employers to measure the employability skills.
- Best practice in employability training could be compared between different colleges or regions to identify best practice.
- Longitudinal studies such as this could be undertaken that examine the long-term effects of colleges' employability support on graduate career success.
- Future research might explore more colleges of different region with larger sample size.

3.3 Limitations of the Study:

- The study is limited to qualitative data collected from a small, judgmental sample of employers and colleges, which may not represent all industries.
- The study does not focus on the personal perception of youth.
- There is a potential for bias in the selection of employers based on their willingness to participate.
- The research does not focus on other than degree colleges.
- The study does not consider other influential factors in students' life.

3.4 Research Methodology:

- The research will adopt a Qualitative approach, focusing on in-depth interviews with employers across different colleges.
- Data Collection Technique - Telephonic Interview.
- Sampling Technique - Random Snowball Sampling
- Sampling size - 15 Colleges and Employee Tie-Ups of these colleges.
- Area - Mumbai Central Colleges only.
- Analysis – Thematic Analysis

Interviews will be semi-structured to allow for flexibility while ensuring that key areas of employability skills, college support, and alignment with industry expectations are covered. The qualitative nature of the study allows for rich, detailed insights into employers' perceptions and provides a comprehensive understanding of the gap between college offerings and market demands.

4. Data Analysis and Interpretation:

4.1 Analysis I)

To conduct a thematic research analysis on the employer interview answers, we identify recurring themes in the responses and group them under larger categories. Thematic analysis involves the process of detecting patterns or themes within qualitative data and drawing out the key points that emerge from the data. Here is the coding identified from the answers provided.

Theme No. 1

Code: Outdated Curriculum

Employers consistently mention that the curriculum is outdated and not aligned with industry demands. Courses tend to focus on theory over practice, leaving students unprepared for the real-world demands of their jobs. Frequent curriculum updates are needed. Colleges need to adapt faster to evolving industry needs. Practical knowledge is emphasized. Graduates lack hands-on experience and job-specific skills.

Theme No. 2

Code: Skills Gaps & Deficiencies

Graduates are often seen as lacking basic technical and soft skills. They have theoretical knowledge but struggle with practical application. Soft skills are neglected. Communication, teamwork, and adaptability are often missing, despite their importance in nearly all jobs. Graduates are not work-ready. Many respondents feel that students are leaving college without the core skills required for success in their industries.

Theme No. 3

Code: Effective Practical Programs

Internships and industry tie-ups are vital. Practical exposure, through internships, co-op programs, and workshops, is seen as critical to preparing students for the work-force. Colleges are failing to provide adequate practical opportunities. Employers believe that colleges should enhance their internship programs and provide more meaningful industry tie-ups. Hands-on projects and real-world simulations are necessary. Employers suggest more applied learning, such as case studies, simulations, and in-depth projects.

Theme No. 4

Code: Positive Impact of Industry Collaboration

There is a disconnect between education and employment sectors. Colleges are not sufficiently collaborating with businesses to ensure that the skills being taught align with the needs of employers. Colleges need to build stronger industry partnerships. This includes working closely with companies to design relevant curricula, create internships, and organize industry-led workshops. More mentorship and guidance programs are needed. Graduates require career counseling and mentoring to help bridge the gap between academic knowledge and industry practices.

Theme No. 5

Code: Practical Exposure Deficit

Traditional teaching methods are no longer sufficient. Employers point out that the focus on theoretical education needs to be balanced with practical, hands-on learning. Workshops and seminars are outdated and lack industry relevance. Employers argue that these need to be modernized with input from industry experts to make them more relevant. Project-based learning should be more widespread. Simulating real-world scenarios and working on actual business projects should be a more integral part of academic programs.

Theme No. 6

Code: Lack of Career Counselling

Many colleges lack adequate career counselling and placement support. Graduates are left without the necessary guidance to successfully transition into the workforce. Students lack direction and mentoring. Employers believe that institutions should invest more in mentorship programs and career counselling to better prepare students for their future careers. More career-oriented

programs are needed. Colleges need to offer job placement support, resume-building workshops, and networking events to connect students with potential employers.

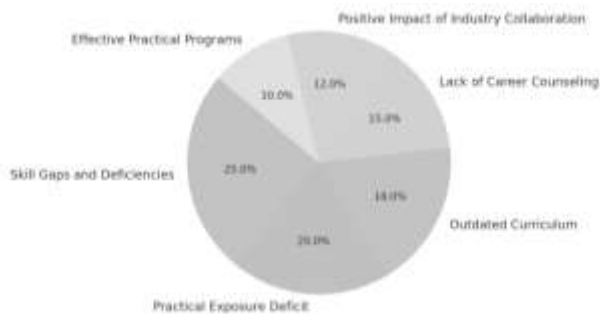


Table 1.1 - Thematic Analysis

- The largest concern, highlighting the mismatch between graduates' skills and industry needs. (25%)
- A significant issue, indicating the lack of hands-on experience for graduates. (20%)
- Employers often found that the academic content did not align with modern industry requirements. (18%)
- A notable gap in guidance and preparation for professional careers. (15%)
- Some employers noticed improvements due to partnerships with industry. (12%)
- A smaller yet positive theme focused on On The Job initiatives that successfully prepared graduates for the workforce. (10%)

4.2 Analysis 2: S.W.O.T. (based on Interview and Secondary Data Collected)

The SWOT analysis will examine the internal strengths and weaknesses of colleges' initiatives, along with the external opportunities and threats in the context of employability skills and employer perceptions.

Strengths

1. Industry Tie-ups and Collaborations: Strong partnerships with industries for internships, placements, and skill-building programs enhance student readiness for employment.
2. Updated Curriculum in Some Colleges: Institutions that regularly update their curriculum based on industry trends help bridge the skills gap effectively.
3. Well-established Placement Cells: Colleges with dedicated placement cells provide strong support for student employability, ensuring good relationships with potential employers.
4. Soft Skills Development Programs: Colleges that incorporate soft skills training, such as communication and teamwork, help students meet employers' expectations.
5. Exposure to Practical Learning: Colleges offering hands-on learning opportunities through internships, workshops, and real-world projects improve students' work-readiness.

Weaknesses

1. Outdated Curriculum in Many Colleges: Inadequate curriculum updates lead to a mismatch between academic training and industry requirements, reducing employability.
2. Limited Practical Exposure: Lack of sufficient internships, industry projects, or hands-on learning leaves students underprepared for real-world challenges.
3. Insufficient Soft Skills Training: Many colleges focus more on theoretical knowledge, neglecting the development of soft skills that are critical for employability.

4. **Inconsistent Placement Support:** Placement cells in some colleges lack strong industry connections, leading to fewer employment opportunities for students.
5. **Lack of Industry Feedback Mechanism:** Absence of feedback loops from employers makes it difficult for colleges to adjust their programs to meet industry needs effectively.

Opportunities

1. **Growing Demand for Industry-Aligned Graduates:** Increasing emphasis on employability skills by employers opens doors for colleges to strengthen their career-oriented programs.
2. **Technological Advancements in Education:** Integration of emerging technologies like AI, data analytics, and digital marketing in the curriculum can prepare students for future jobs.
3. **Government Initiatives for Skill Development:** Government-led programs and policies focused on vocational training and skill development can be leveraged by colleges to enhance employability.
4. **Partnerships with Global Educational Platforms:** Collaborating with online education platforms offering industry-relevant certifications can help colleges equip students with in-demand skills.
5. **Increased Focus on Entrepreneurship:** Colleges can promote entrepreneurial skills and start-up incubation programs to provide students with alternative career pathways.

Threats

1. **Rapid Technological Changes:** The fast-paced evolution of technology may lead to a skills gap if colleges are unable to adapt their programs quickly enough.
2. **High Employer Expectations:** Employers increasingly expect graduates to be fully work-ready, putting pressure on colleges to meet high industry standards.
3. **Competition from Alternative Education Providers:** Online platforms and private training institutes offering specialized skill programs are competing with traditional college education.
4. **Economic Instability and Job Market Fluctuations:** Economic downturns can limit job opportunities for graduates, posing challenges to college placement efforts.
5. **Disconnection Between Academia and Industry:** Persistent disconnects between academic institutions and industry needs can result in ongoing employability challenges for graduates.

5. Conclusion:

In conclusion, this research underscores the significant challenges faced by degree colleges in Mumbai regarding the placement of fresh graduates in jobs, supporting the acceptance of the alternative hypothesis. The data reveals that only 25-35% of graduates secure placements directly through their colleges, pointing to a substantial gap in employability skills fostered during their academic programs. Students often encounter difficulties in securing employment after graduation, largely due to a lack of industry-relevant skills and practical exposure. Faculty members, too, face obstacles in keeping academic programs aligned with the rapidly evolving demands of industries, which hampers their ability to provide adequate placement and internship opportunities for their students.

Employers perceive fresh graduates as lacking in critical soft skills, professional readiness, and hands-on experience, which further hinders their smooth transition into the workforce. The gap between academic knowledge and the practical needs of the industry is a persistent issue that prevents graduates from meeting employer expectations, leading to poor employment outcomes. This research highlights the importance of implementing more dynamic and industry-responsive academic practices, as the current disconnect between education and employability is evident.

Our proposed solutions, including introducing incubator centers in the NEP curriculum after Semester 4, on-the-job training, and practical workshops, aim to bridge this gap. By incorporating more application-based studies, offering career guidance as a statutory body, and conducting soft skills training and mock interviews, academic institutions can better prepare students for the workforce. These initiatives, along with updating the curriculum every three years and offering industry-oriented training and certification, will bolster the employability of graduates and ensure that academic institutions remain agile and relevant in a constantly changing job market.

5.1 Suggestions:

- Incubator centers in NEP Curriculum after Sem 4 (OJT).
- Along with NSS & Cultural, Start-Up Curriculum should be added in Extension activities.
- Awareness of Application Based Study.
- Curriculum shall be 60% theory exams and 40% only on-field practical projects only.
- Update Curriculum every 3 years.
- Proper Career Guidance Cells as a Statutory body to be started.
- Industry oriented training and certification courses to be offered to all the Stakeholders (Parents & Faculties).
- Practical Workshop for Resilience and Insights understanding.
- Soft Skills, Mock Interviews & Profile Building Sessions every Saturday.
- Certain Physio metric Tests to be conducted by the Counsellor.
- Improvisation in Teaching Approach as per Industrial Standards.

5.2 Further Research Scope:

- Future studies may consider adopting a mixed-methods approach: quantitative surveys of personal perception of Youth and Employers to measure the employability skills.
- Best practice in employability training could be compared between different colleges or regions to identify best practice.
- Longitudinal studies such as this could be undertaken that examine the long-term effects of colleges' employability support on graduate career success.
- Future research might explore more colleges of different region with larger sample size.

6. Appendix:

Questionnaire for Interview:

- 1) In your experience, what specific skills or qualities do you find most lacking in recent graduates, and how does this affect their performance in your organization?
- 2) Can you describe some of the strengths or positive attributes you commonly observe in recent graduates that make them stand out during the hiring process?
- 3) How do you perceive the mindset and professional readiness of recent graduates when they first join your organization? What areas of improvement do you think they need to focus on?
- 4) In what ways do you believe colleges and universities are successfully preparing students for the current demands of your industry? Can you provide examples of effective programs or initiatives?
- 5) What suggestions would you offer to educational institutions to enhance the employability of their graduates and better align their programs with industry needs?

6) How important do you believe practical exposure (such as internships, workshops, and industry tie-ups) is in developing industry-ready graduates? What additional measures could colleges implement to further support students' transition to the workforce?

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