



## **BRIDGING THE SKILL GAP IN THE INDIAN ECONOMY: A MERE HANDSHAKE OR AN END TO END COLLABORATION?**

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### **Abstract**

*The world is shrinking at a fast pace. The advent of technology and machine learning has brought about an unparalleled technological revolution which has impacted every little aspect of our life. Keeping pace with the growing technology is a challenge that many organizations are now facing. The technological changes and advancement have not impacted the education sector as much as they should ideally have. Industry intervention is restricted to predefined hours and topics which focus on awareness but not advancement. The need of the hour is a smarter, more agile workforce that can cope with constant change and innovation.*

*In a cultural and geographically diverse India, the social fabric plays an essential role in the education system. Dealing with issues like infrastructure, availability of skilled teachers, gender inequality and lack of technology initiatives in the field of education create a workforce that is deficient in meeting the industry expectation.*

*With global workplace and shrinking markets, we as a nation, need to rework and build the education system in a way that we have a workforce that is employable. This requires a huge collaboration between academicians, policy makers and industrialists. A mere awareness is not enough and the higher education system needs to be based on industry requirements and employability skills. This can be achieved only if the industrial world collaborates with the academia at the level of designing and crafting a syllabus that has scope for constant upgradation and practical implementation. A mere hand shake between the industry and academia is not enough but an end to end collaboration from syllabus designing to absorbing the workforce needs to be created.*

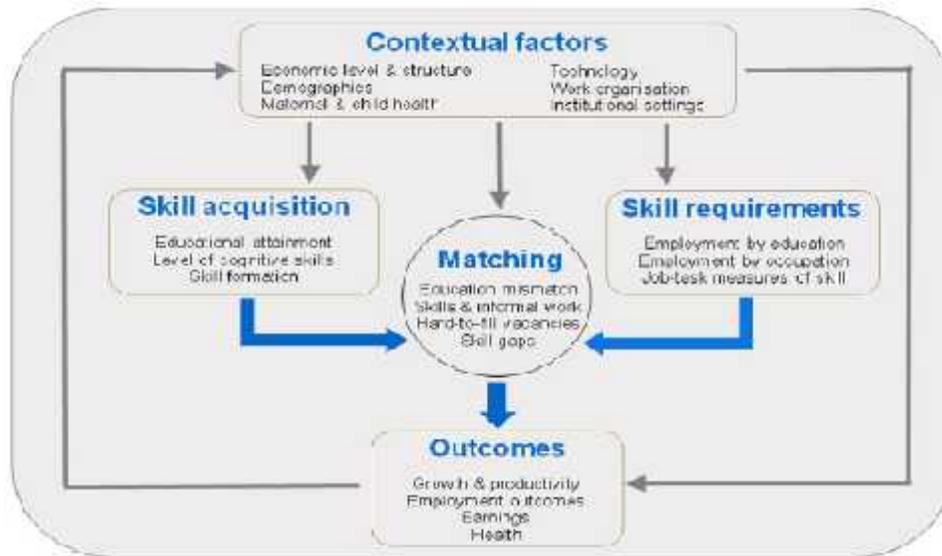
**Key Words:** *Employability, Skill Gap, Education Upgradation, Industry Requirements, Industry Collaboration.*

### **Introduction**

The advent of technological innovations, globalization and economic liberalization in the recent years has forced industries and academicians alike to recognize the glaring skill gap in human resources and the lack of a skilled workforce. Skill development has a direct impact on the economic competitiveness and growth of a nation and it has become imperative to understand the reasons for the existing gap and the methodologies required to bridge this gap.

This paper attempts to understand the meaning of skill gap, the underlying reasons and provide a conceptual framework for improving the employability of human resources.

**Figure1: Conceptual framework for indicators of skills**



Source: OECD: A report for the Human Resource Development Pillar of the G20 multi-year action plan on development.

Employability skills are the general skills and knowledge that are necessary for success in the labour market at all employment levels and in all sectors. Successful careers are built on strong interpersonal and functional skills. The challenge however is to identify, define and measure these skills and to able to integrate them within the societal and governmental fabric to achieve the desired results.

There are many factors for the constantly changing economy however; there are two important questions that need to be considered:

- ? What are the critical skills that the workforce of tomorrow needs to develop and master.
- ? How can we improve our learning methods for a more integrated and self-directed approach towards learning.

The need to focus on the current state and future of graduate skills is of paramount importance as developed and developing countries struggle to train and maintain the intellectual capital required to compete globally. With the advent of Generation Z into the work force, the need for focus on employee training & development has increased manifold. Paradoxically, organizations are growing increasingly reluctant to invest in their training as the workforce is notoriously ambivalent to commitment and less loyal than the previous generation workforce. This has led to an increase in the responsibility of skill development on the higher education institutions. However, the major challenge faced by educational institutions is to understand and clearly define the skills required by the industry to be able to integrate those in the classroom. The aim is to have graduates who are employable and industry ready rather than creating an entire generation of a workforce that is educated but not skilled.

Academicians and teachers are no longer restricted to the role of imparting education but need to focus on becoming facilitators for imparting life skills. This requires a massive shift in the mindset of educators and a change in their focus from book learning to work integrated learning. The traditional methods of classroom lectures and rote learning need to give way to a more practical approach of integrated work based learning where the focus is on developing skills required in the industry. This will enable students to experience work practices and applying skills and knowledge in the real-world scenario. Collaborations between employers and the education sector help educators to deliberate on the skills to emphasize in curriculum, classroom instruction and



other extra curriculum efforts. These partnerships provide employers with the opportunity to expose students to the real-life application of employability skills while building an awareness of and a potential pipeline for their businesses and industries.

### **Literature review**

In the article on “Employability skill development in work-integrated learning: Barriers and best practice, *Studies in Higher Education*, 40:2, 350-367, DOI:10.1080/03075079.2013.842221” Denise Jackson has made a detailed elaboration on Work Integrated Learning including the need and challenges of such an approach.

A report for the human resource development pillar of the g20 multi-year action plan on development: OECD and the World Bank in collaboration with ETF, ILO and UNESCO. This report discusses the indicators of skills for employment and productivity: a conceptual framework and approach for low-income countries.

### **Methodology**

The attempt of this paper is two-fold. The paper does a non-empirical analysis:

to understand the need for industries to collaborate real time with the higher education institutions in order to define and develop the practical skills required as per the industry standards.

The second aspect is also to understand the need for change required in the role of academicians in the higher education institutions.

The inferences, discussions and conclusions are purely based on secondary data available with different Government and private sources.

### **Analysis and Inferences**

The ethos of Work Integrated Learning (WIL) is based on the theory of active (Bonwell and Eison 1991) and experiential (Kolb 1984) learning, where learners transition from visualizing and listening and actually attempt to ‘do’ what they are being taught. One conceptualization of WIL aligns with Lave and Wenger’s (1991) model of situated learning, where learning is enhanced when participating in a community of practice, rather than in isolation from it. Students should therefore be able to interact with a real-work context and undertake authentic work activities as part of their undergraduate experience.

In a culturally and geographical diverse country like India, the government needs to focus the efforts on creating a skill sector with an employable workforce in various sectors and segments. This requires designing the curriculum based on the jobs available in the market rather than create unemployable graduates and then match them to the available jobs. The concept of work integrated learning can play a major role in creating an agile and employable workforce which can actively contribute to the growth of the economy. The current classroom learning does not adequately prepare students for their placement, particularly in their ability to use technology and communication skills to interact with co-workers and clients. Hypothetical classroom scenarios are often insufficient in preparing students for the realities of the professional work environment. Certain skills, particularly those that require group work and developing professionalism are not given serious considerations in a regular classroom scenario. The concept of Work Integrated Learning (WIL) tries to address some of these issues by integrating the traditional classroom learning with the practical activities required for skill development.

Integrating mandatory internships with every undergraduate program will increase the exposure of students to real like work environment and give them opportunities to apply knowledge learnt in the classroom to practical scenarios. For this, every educational institution needs to mandatorily partner with industries to provide internship to the students. Inclusion of internship after the completion of every semester, within the curriculum will have more impact on the learning curve of the students rather than a single internship at the far end of the completion of the course. This will also give students the exposure to different fields of work and enable them to make the right career decision at the completion of the course.



Focus on real time projects that involve group work, data collection, analysis and interpretation of data and presentation of information, help students to solidify the skills learnt in the classroom and develop them before commencing full time work.

In today's fast paced changing economy, it is essential for students to be current and up to date in their skills. However, a brief look at the syllabus taught across the various universities in India, shows a glaring deficit in the information being taught to students and the requirement of the industry, thus leaving the graduates unemployable. Educational institutions run by the government and deemed universities across the country need to develop a framework to constantly update the curriculum to keep it up to date. The current methodology of reviewing syllabus once in five years leaves the students grossly ill-equipped to handle the requirement of the industry thus developing a work force which has a higher learning curve. Educational institutions need to constantly upgrade their syllabus and this can be best achieved by having active participation from the industry. Members from the industry should be actively involved in the designing of higher education syllabus as they are better equipped to understand the practical skill gaps of the workforce. This participation will help in eliminating the glaring gaps the current education system has in the skill set of the workforce that we churn out year after year.

In a developing country like India, where education is still a liberty that cannot be afforded by many, it is also imperative to develop skill sets that are away from the traditional schemes of doctors and engineers and general managers. The focus should also be on equally developing technical courses that enable students to find a job and source of income. The government needs to focus on building skill initiatives for small time professionals like electricians, plumbers, beauticians, gardeners which gives them the skills required to start earning a living. Some of the initiatives and schemes launched by the government of India on this front are commendable. However, for these initiatives to take shape in the right direction, it is essential for industries to have a stake and partnership in these initiatives. Without participation, from the industry, the problem of create a workforce that is unemployable still remains. With the participation of industry in these ventures, the focus shifts from a pure academic or skill leaning centre to a professional, skill- ready centre.

It is also essential to understand and identify the links between education, health problems and gender gaps in our country. All these elements have a direct impact on the education and skill development of the population. The lack of proper sanitation and access to a healthy living environment and good food and nutrition has a big impact on the number of children who actually reach the level of higher education. These issues are more predominant in the rural sectors thus restricting the younger generation to different industries available to them for growth. The governments education efforts need to be equally focused on the rural sector where the government run educational institutions need to have a higher accountability for their students. The lack of well qualified teachers and the apathy towards the rural sector from the industry and government alike, results an atmosphere where there is no growth or scope for the students. There have to be CSR initiatives from the industry which focus on improving the health, sanitation and education conditions in the rural sector. A complete collaboration between the government and industries to adopt practices that enable the involvement of both in the development of the economy is the only solution to uplift the dismal conditions of health, sanitation and education in the rural sector. The second focus of this paper is on the shift in the attitude of the academia to create a more developmental approach towards education. The current rift between the academia and industry is one of the main reasons why a developing nation like India is still producing unemployable workforce.

The role of academia in the current scenario is not about being teacher but about being facilitators to a generation that is technologically more advanced but lacking in focus and professionalism. It is essential to integrate technology into classroom and teaching methodologies in order to both, effectively engage the students in the classroom and also to move from the old methods of rote learning of outdated curriculum to new methodologies of outcome based learning.



The academia of a nation have a huge role in shaping the future generations and hence it is essential for them to be up to date and current in their information and outlook. The role of a teacher is not to teach rows and rows of empty minds but to force those minds to question and learn. This can only happen when academicians constantly upgrade themselves and work towards changing classrooms into practical fields of learning. Moving from the traditional methods of rote learning and paper assessments, academicians need to inculcate tools like practical modules, real life case studies, industry mentoring, research projects as part of their curriculum to enable students to strengthen the skills that they are learning in the classroom.

The concept of 'industry mentoring' can be a powerful and effective tool for academicians to bring about a change in the current education system of India. Partnerships with industry professionals to develop courses, provide internships, develop entrepreneurship cells and encourage innovation cells within institutions, under the guidance of industry professionals, is a powerful tool to create a workforce that is more industry ready.

### **Conclusion**

The initiatives by the government of India like Skill Development Mission, BetiPadoAbhiyaan, SwachBharath etc. are a positive effort towards developing a more agile workforce. However, the need of the hour is to have an end to end collaboration between the academia and the industry. The active participation of the industry members in creating and updating syllabus, setting up entrepreneurship and innovation cells within educational institutions, and engaging in CSR initiatives to bring quality education to the economically backward sectors will help in building a better and employable workforce.

It is also important to have a radical shift in the attitude of the academia. The focus needs to be on changing classrooms from a lecture zone to a practical zone where academicians are actively involved in imparting skill based development to the students. Each subject needs to be viewed from an outcome based angle where the skill imparted to the student should be of paramount importance. The student should be able to apply the theoretical knowledge gained in the classroom in a real life professional scenario. When the focus on outcome based learning begins in the classroom itself, the accountability of learning also increases for the students.

An end to end collaboration between the industry and the academia – beginning from the development of health and sanitation infrastructure to syllabus crafting to providing internships before a full time employment is the only way for a developing nation like India to bridge the skill gap between the industry and the academia and to build a workforce that is more agile and employable.

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