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**ENABLING HIGHER EDUCATION GRADUATES WITH
EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS :
A NEW FRAMEWORK IN ACADEMIC FLEXIBILITY**



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ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of higher education in the country has in some respect created as many problems as it has solved. In today's world, Education, Skills and Employability are of paramount importance. The Higher education must recognize that for many higher education graduates the transition from education to employment is not a straightforward matter and many of the graduates are miles away from employment due to ill equipped skills acquired by them during their education. It is expected from the policy makers and educationists to work upon enabling students to acquire core academic skills and ability to apply those skills to concrete situations in order to function on the workplace and in routine daily activities; employability skills are the typical traditional skills in higher education along with the technical, job-specific

skills related to specific career pathway that can be provided to the students. The fourth industrial revolution is expected to give rise to growing need for fresh skills required for fusion of cutting age technology. The impact of this paradigm shift is faster and quick than its earlier development and required skilled force on both the stake holders such as students, teachers as well as the whole society. To cater the need of the time, updating the curriculum is in demand. More and more academic flexibility is offered by various institutions to attract the students and gain net enrolment. The learner looks forward to learn beyond the defined and fixed curriculum that would help him to be competent and employable. Thus Higher Educational Institutions must recognize that for many students the transition from education into employment is not a straightforward matter. The students have to learn soft skills and life skills to qualify for the employability. To realize this, traditional framework of the curriculum need to be modified by stating clear vision for the learning outcome that bridge the gap and increase the graduate employability.

This paper is an attempt to discuss an alternative approach in curricular development framework and various measures to create employability skills among the undergraduate students to obtain the lateral and vertical mobility in the process of education.

KEYWORDS

Academic Flexibility, Employability

RESEARCH PAPER

Introduction

Higher Education in India is at the core of the developmental challenges. Advanced technological development in the last two decades brought global competitiveness, hence shouldered more responsibility on the policy makers and educationists all over the world. The structural transformation in the global economy needs an additional workforce of 3.3 billion by the next 3 years now.¹ India is expected to become the second largest economy by 2050, and is one of the youngest nations with more than 62% of its population in the working age group i.e. 15-59 years². Thus, India will not only have a young workforce to fulfill its domestic needs, it also has the opportunity to become the global hub for skilled workforce. This window of opportunity is also a challenge. A skill gap study indicates that there is an additional net incremental requirement of 109.73 million skilled manpower by 2022 in 24 key sectors. The youth of India need education and skills to be able to fulfill their promise and the current systems are ill-equipped to deliver these on a large scale. Government and Institutions will need to adopt transformational and innovative approach to make India's higher education system globally competent. The fourth industrial revolution is expected to give rise to growing need for fresh skills required for fusion of cutting age technology. The impact of this paradigm shift is faster and quick than its earlier development and required skilled force on both the stake holders such as students, teachers as well as the whole society. To cater the need of the time, updating the curriculum is in demand. More and more academic flexibility offered by various institutions to attract the students and gain net enrolment. The learner looks forward to learn beyond the defined and fixed curriculum that would help him to be competent and employable. Thus Higher Educational Institutions must recognize that for many students the transition from education into employment is not a straightforward matter. The students have to learn soft skills and life skills to qualify for the employability. To realize this, traditional framework of the curriculum need to be modified by stating clear vision for the learning outcome that bridge the gap and increase the graduate employability.

This paper is an attempt to discuss an alternative approach in curricular development framework and various measures to create employability skills among the undergraduate students to obtain the lateral and vertical mobility in the process of education.

Academic Framework and Flexibility

Even though our higher education system is one of the largest in the world, the GER (Gross Enrolment Ratio) is far below (approx. 15%) the world average of the developing countries. By the end of 12th five year plan period, GER target to be 21% and by 2030 it is 30%. We need to take innovative steps to increase the GER. The policy measures and programs which were aimed at improving access to higher education to all have yielded some large number of students entering the higher education institutions. However major chunk of youth is away from the benefit of higher education. Beyond GER, quality higher education is another serious threat that our country is facing. The dropout rate in the higher education is quite high. Too many students are exiting higher learning without the skills that the employers and society demands. Unless India does not produce the globally relevant and competitive higher education system, to serve the demand of the skilled workforce required by the world, the developed India will remain dream in the few years.

The closed academic framework followed by our universities restricts the graduate quality; academic qualification of the degree has been proved to be on a paper merely stating an ability to perform to a particular level of academic competence. In the real sense, when the graduates enter into the global competitive market, they stand nowhere. Today's graduates face a different employment challenge than that of earlier generations. It is an age of fourth industrial revolution. The continuous changing and advancement in the technological aspects in various fields demands an updated and skilled workforce to cope with it. A strong commitment among the higher educational institutions all over the world is needed to create an integrated multidisciplinary research Programme that brings the policy makers, educationists, researchers, practitioners and other stakeholders to come together to make better decision and frame a to be perfect policy to fulfill the requirement of current technological demands.

Government of India is in the process of framing a New Education Policy for meeting the changing dynamics of the population's requirement with regard to quality education, innovation and research aiming to make India a knowledge superpower by equipping its students with the necessary skills and knowledge in, 33 identified themes.³

Three themes under higher education are relevant to policy initiative for restructuring the curriculum. The theme 'Integrating skill development in higher education', 'Linking higher

education to society' and 'New Knowledge' relating to higher education institutions identifying the new domains of knowledge in the global scenario.

To realize this curriculum should provide for building employability skills among students. It is widely agreed that curriculum per se and real job performance do not match and there is need to incorporate skill supplements to boost employability. An open system curriculum framework allows more flexibility to the students to choose the curriculum pattern of their choice. For effective implementation of the curriculum, the institutions develop and deploy action plans (Manual for self-study report of Affiliated college, 2013) which integrates time, quality, quantity and accountability. The curriculum is supplemented through a variety of certificate programmers of varying duration. These courses are intended to enrich employability skills among students and reduce the gap between curriculum learning and practical requirements. Students in any course can choose to take any of the two certificate programmers offered for the year and put in additional hours of classroom and on the hand learning and undergo a proficiency test to qualify for pass. But while working on linkage to industry and curriculular aspect, it is essential to have quoted exact requirement of the industrial work force needed as industry needed a ready-for-the job professionals so that they can minimize on training and skills acquisition. It can devote its much valuable time for other activities. Unemployment and under employment can be reduced if higher educational institutional focus on imparting employability skills to the students.

New Measures of Learning And Learning Outcome:

At present there are wide varieties of measurement of the learning objectives and its outcomes. The National Skills Development Corporations (NSDC) addresses the issue of the learning outcome in a different way and relates it to the employability. The term employability aroused out the need of an additional workforce required due to advancement in the technological aspects all over the world. While keeping an objective on the learning outcome and designing the new measures of learning, earlier policy Interventions have generally stressed on GER in Higher education which is currently around 23%⁴. It may increase to 30% through activities and programs organized by RUSA (Rastriya Uchatar Shiksha Abhiyaan). But it gives only a general enrolment to higher education and does not guarantee any quality in higher education. According to one industry association study less than 20% of those graduating from our institutions are rated as immediately employable by industry. Thus it is perhaps time to pay attention to the new term of GER such as Gross Employable Ratio.

The new dynamics of learning outcome can be measured by keeping in view the basic aspect new GER and changing perspectives of higher education in the 21st century. Since education is process of achieving perfection that already present in the mankind. The perfection in the process of learning can be achieved only through perfect learning experience. A learning experience makes a graduate 'career ready'. Such career readiness involves three major skills; core academic skills and the ability to apply those skills to concrete situations in order to function in the workplace and in routine daily activities; employability skills that are essential in any career area; and technical, job-specified skills related to specific career pathway.⁵

Considering the 4th industrial revolution a truly career ready students need to be able to apply academics in context, and some academic skills need more attention and development. For example, employers often cite deficiencies in English and written communication, such as memos letters and complex technical reports, technical manuals and research articles and they must be equipped academically to analyze and use these materials. Students must also be able to apply academic knowledge to authentic situations they may face in their careers a skill that takes practice and intentional instruction that may need to be tailored to a student's specific careers goals. Employability skills have often been by employers as the skills most critical to workplace success in the 21st-century economy. These skills include (but are not limited to) critical thinking, adaptability, problem solving, oral and written communication, collaboration and teamwork, creativity, responsibility, professionalism, ethics and technology use. Student must be provided opportunities to gain these skills and to learn to apply them to real world life and work situation. Many of these employability skills are necessary for graduate ready and employee ready creating some additional overlap between the two areas. Since most of career opportunities for today's students will require some form of post - secondary education, these are many times when students will not be able to acquire the necessary academic technical or employability skills in high school that will allow them to be career ready without further education and training. Additional knowledge and specialization in one or more of these areas is often required either immediately or in the future depending on a student's career choices. However regardless of a student's path it takes all three of these broad skill sets for students to be ready for a career. Twenty first century graduates should focus on providing all students, strong foundation across all these areas so they are prepared for whatever their lives may bring.

The following three competencies or skills need to be in the place in order for a person to be better prepared for the world of work. Practical competences: the ability to perform a set of task; Foundational competences: the ability to understand what we, or others, are doing and why; and Reflective competences; an ability to integrate or connect our performances with an understanding of the performances of others, so that we can learn from our actions and be able to adapt to change and unforeseen circumstances. These three competences or skills make it possible for citizens to continually improve upon the performance. These three skills can be imbibed among the learners to be employee ready. Since knowledge is not acquired in isolation to adopt the skills mentioned above. A perfect interdisciplinary approach allows students to see different perspectives to the same situation and learn to analyze individually encourages them to reach beyond the typical constraints of a single content area fosters critical thinking, creativity, collaboration and communication skills⁷.

A New Dynamic Approach to Academic Flexibility

A detail discussion on the necessity of the employability skills among the graduate learners concludes the essence of changing an approach to the fixed framework of curriculum. With growing requirement of new skills, students are facing situations wherein they need to get into jobs that were never part of their course curriculum, or they do not have the skills required for the most lucrative jobs when they graduate, interdisciplinary and choice based approach in this regards may cater the need of time. By enlisting the core skills required for a graduate to be employee ready, a change in the framework of the curriculum can be adopted, so that a student will enjoy the flexibility in learning. The launch of new technology and new ways of working have short listed certain skills such as complex problem solving, critical thinking, creativity, people management, coordination with others, emotional intelligence, cognitive flexibility, etc. at high demand by the industry⁸.

Government has also realized the importance of the problem employability and need of additional workforce as well as the quality enhancement in the field of higher education to increase the global competency among the Indian graduates. The research done by various organizations in the field of education, have suggested certain schemes and implication to cope up with the problems in the future. National Skills Development Corporation NSDC has taken an initiative to study the skill gap between the industry and education. MHRD, working with various vocational training departments try to bridge the gap between industry and the skilled

workforce. Few of the private organizations such as Maruti, Bharti Telecom, L &T, etc. are working with the reputed educational organizations to bridge the gap.

The requirement of workforce with technical skills may be fulfilled with the help of successful industry linkages. But the question remains about the other skills such as soft skills and life skills. The traditional colleges may come forward in this case to have linkages to industry and other similar organizations worldwide. To enhance employability among the Arts, Commerce and Science graduates, one has to think critically about the soft skills and life skills courses and inclusion of them in the fixed frame of curriculum.

The choice based credit system adopted by various institutions and universities has already opened the doors to an interdisciplinary approach. The minimum credits earned by the learner can be modified along with the inclusion of some typical skills in the fixed frame work of curriculum.

The choice based credit system introduced by National Knowledge Commission will be helpful in the modification and slight revision of the curriculum framework. Institutes on the need based approach can modify and include the short term courses required to enhance the employability of graduate learners. It has already been conveyed by the NKCL that after introducing the CBCGS (Choice Based Credit Grading System) will greatly improve the employability of students. It does promote the students mobility; both lateral and vertical. Industrial collaborations with the educational institutions will be helpful to keep pace with the updated and exact requirement of the skilled workforce, so that a slight modification and flexibility in designing the curriculum can be adopted. It can go a long way to develop the capacity of the students.

Introducing A Skill Model With CBCGS

Here is a model of an integrated degree program along with a training of soft skill or life skills incorporated in the fixed frame of curriculum. Collaborations with various local as well as multinational industries, a step by step training can be given to the students off site as well as on site. 30 to 48 weeks of training spread over three year degree program will not be an additional burden to the students who wish to join the training. Moreover we can modify the minimum credits earned by the students at the end of three year integrated program. Students can choose their way of interest to join any program irrespective of the faculty, subject, etc. The integrated program can offer courses in all the subjects and various fields such as mass media, journalism, language proficiency, introductory dialect studies, event management, drama, folk, classical,

western dance, music, tally, secretarial practices, digital marketing, accounting and auditing, software development, app making, office management, Scientific Instrument Handling, Medical Electronics, Heritage management and tourism, office automation, industrial automation, mobile repair, cyber crime, statistics, travel, tourism and many more engineering and technical fields depend on the requirement and collaborations. Following Table will briefly introduce the new model of short term courses to enhance employability through skill training program blend with fixed curricular framework.

Table 1.A Dynamic Approach to CBCGS System in A Fixed Frame of Curriculum With Maximum Flexibility

Sr No.	Level of Certification	Minimum Duration in weeks	Maximum Duration in weeks	Remark
01	Short Term Course Level 0	1 – 4	6	Introductory soft skills
02	Short Term Course 01	1 – 4	6	Foundation Course to acquire basic skills
03	Short Term Course 03	6	9	Introduction to specialized skills
04	Short Term Course 04	6	9	Proactive skills training.
05	Short Term Course 05	6	9	On job training/adoption.
06	Short Term Course 06	6	9	Project Report Submission/ Industry engagement.
		>30 weeks	<48 weeks	After successful completion of the program, a learner can go for actual Placement or degree with training certificate based on the learner's choice, ability and skills adopted.

Advantages Of A New Skill Model

- The course is designed with slight modification in credits earned by the learner so does add burden of the course work.
- The choice of the course work is as per the learner's interest and aptitude.
- The whole course work pattern is spread over all three years, if a learner wants to quit the program in between the coursework, at the end of third year; he has to earn minimum credits to obtain integrated degree with certificate.
- The collaborative program offered by reputed industries and organizations can definitely reduce an additional financial burden on the learner as well as an institution.
- There is no additional infrastructure required to run such collaborative programs as part of onsite training is given by the industry or organization.
- An institute does not have to recruit an additional staff to look after the same, as the collaborative organizations have ready trained staff with them.
- An institute can have a sustainable model in some of the certificate programs such event management, software development, performing arts, etc.
- The skilled and trained students with additional capacity will bring a kind of repute and laurel to the college or organization.
- No need of additional placement camps to be organized.
- The college campus engagement, student's engagement, staff engagement and society involvement bring proactive atmosphere in and around the college.
- Skills earned in one of the key area can be extended to learn other skills.
- A new career ready graduates and employee ready graduates will be at the same time.
- Its dynamic and easily modified approach can keep pace with the latest development in the technology and an industry requirement.
- Its high versatility and simple mechanism of evaluation will attract more and more students.

Summary

Higher education institution and policy makers have realized that for many students, the transition from education to employment need to be handled in a tactful approach to meet the requirement of the additional skilled workforce in the age of 4th industrial revolution. Instead of experimenting on the stereo type evaluation method every three years, policy makers and

educationists can adopt proposed integration of skill development program blend with regular fixed frame of curriculum having modified by slight additional changes in the newly adopted CBCGS scheme. It will truly reflect the ideology adopted by NSDC through skill India Mission as well as objective of Knowledge superpower kept National Knowledge Commission.

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