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ROLE OF NEP 2020 IN SKILL DEVELOPMENT AND EMPLOYABILITY AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

NEP 2020 is attempting to bring higher education much more into line with actual learning and graduate skills. This paper looks at how the various provisions of the policy might improve employability and what could stand in the way of those benefits actually reaching the student. It draws on NEP 2020, the UGC curriculum framework, the National Credit Framework, the existing literature and the Mercer | Mettl India Graduate Skill Index 2025. Seven pathways are considered: vocational study, internships, multidisciplinary choice, digital competence, communication, entrepreneurship and employer involvement. The paper concludes that these opportunities can indeed produce transferable skills if the colleges provide the requisite supervision, resources and assessment of the work that the students do. Mercer | Mettl's 2024 data shows 42.6% employability among the graduates that were assessed for the selected roles (the 2023 recalculated figure was 44.3%). The data does not in any way reflect the impact of NEP 2020. To determine whether the policy's flexibility actually leads to improved skills we will need better internship design, faculty support, equitable access and graduate outcome tracking. This is a documentary study in nature and provides an analytical framework rather than a causal estimate. It does however identify the key areas that would be suitable for further empirical research.

Keywords: National Education Policy 2020, employability, higher education, vocational learning, internships, skill assessment, India

1 INTRODUCTION

A graduate can be very well versed in a subject and still find themselves struggling in an interview, on a work assignment or in the first few months of a job. That gap isn't always down to a lack of academic knowledge. The student may simply have had very limited opportunities to explain their work, to work in a team under pressure and to apply what they'd learned to new problems. At the same time the employer's decision is going to be influenced by the availability of jobs and the way they are hiring and that's something the university can't control. It is therefore crucial to make the distinction between being ready for work and actually getting work.

The NEP 2020 (Ministry of Education, 2020) attempts to deal with part of the issue by embedding vocational education, practical exposure and a multidisciplinary approach more firmly into higher education. It also proposes flexible undergraduate pathways, an Academic Bank of Credits and wider access to internships. The policy set a target of at least half of the learners in both school and higher education being exposed to some form of vocational education by 2025 and a higher education gross enrolment ratio of 50% by 2035. Again these were policy targets, not outcomes as established by this paper.

The central issue is what happens once a university has adopted the new framework. An 'ability enhancement' course may be of some use, but the name tells you very little about what the student can actually achieve at the end of it. The same can be said of an internship which may give the student some exposure to the actual world of work or may result in nothing more than a certificate. This paper looks at the mechanisms through which the NEP 2020 could improve employability and the institutional choices that would be required to make those mechanisms effective.

2 EMPLOYABILITY AND THE POLICY CONTEXT

2.1 What employability means

Yorke (2006) defines employability as the range of achievements, understanding and personal attributes which will enhance a graduate's chances of securing and thriving in employment. That's broader than placement rates. One graduate may be quite capable but find themselves in a weak labour market. Another may get a job but may not actually have the requisite skills for the role as it develops. Tomlinson (2012) brings in a very useful social dimension: qualifications and skills are important, but so are networks, access to opportunities and the way in

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which people present their experience. A college's policy can have a significant impact on many of these factors without necessarily having control over all of them.

For this paper skill development is defined as the acquisition and demonstrated application of subject knowledge, practical skills and transferable skills. Employability is the ability to go out and find, take up and maintain appropriate work or self employment. That distinction means that an improvement in the availability of training opportunities doesn't automatically equate to an improvement in employability.

2.2 From policy principles to undergraduate programmes

NEP 2020 provides for three and four year undergraduate programmes with the possibility of multidisciplinary study and stages at which students could exit and re-enter. The University Grants Commission's Curriculum and Credit Framework for Undergraduate Programmes (2022) outlines the credit requirements, skill based components, internships and the associated qualifications. Under the National Credit Framework, academic, vocational and eligible experiential learning can be awarded, accumulated and transferred as credits, on the basis of assessment (Ministry of Education, 2023). This makes different forms of learning more recognisable. Whether or not a particular institution can offer the right courses, the right mentors and portable credits is a separate issue of implementation.

3 REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

The literature gives us good reasons to anticipate the benefits of practice based education but also makes it clear why simply changing the syllabus is not the answer. Kolb's (1984) model of experiential learning is a cycle of experience, reflection, conceptualisation and further experimentation. An internship is an exemplar of this approach if students are actually doing the work, getting feedback and then making sense of what they've done. Simply being present at a workplace is not enough to complete the cycle.

Aithal and Aithal (2020) looked at the changes proposed under the NEP 2020 and considered what the implementation of those changes would mean for higher education. It's a useful exercise in terms of understanding the reform agenda, though the proposals and the predicted outcomes in no way constitute actual measured outcomes. Yorke (2006) and Tomlinson (2012) both go on to argue that graduates need to have the usable skills as well as the opportunity to demonstrate those skills. Put together, this points to a practical test of the sort: can the student explain, do and improve a task which is in some way analogous to what they would be expected to do on graduation?

The Mercer | Mettl India Graduate Skill Index 2025 provides a rather different kind of evidence. Based on its assessment universe of over 1m students from over 2700 campuses it reports an overall employability figure of 42.6% in 2024 (down from 44.3% in 2023 when the 2023 figures were recalculated). Employability in non-technical roles fell from 48.3% to 43.5% while in technical roles it rose from 41.3% to 42.0% (Mercer | Mettl, 2025). Performance is assessed against vendor defined skill benchmarks rather than actual job placement. The 2023 figures were recalculated following a change in methodology and the assessed group is not a random sample of all Indian graduates. It can therefore only be used to identify areas of concern and not to determine whether NEP 2020 has had any effect.

These sources do of course cover the aims of the policy, the value of experiential learning and the existence of skills related difficulties. They simply don't go on to show to what extent individual institutions have in fact turned the new provisions into actual graduate skills. That is the gap which this documentary analysis seeks to address at the level of the plausible pathways and the requirements for implementation.

4 OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

4.1 Objectives

- Identify the NEP 2020 provisions which are most relevant to the development of graduate skills.
- Explain how those provisions would impact workplace readiness, with concrete examples of learning and assessment.
- Look at the implementation barriers and suggest ways in which institutions can test progress.

4.2 Research design

This is a descriptive and analytical paper based solely on secondary sources. The key policy sources are the NEP 2020, the UGC undergraduate curriculum framework and the National Credit Framework. The conceptual literature was selected on the basis of its relevance to the themes of employability and experiential learning. The Mercer | Mettl report was included as a recent, independent assessment provider view on skill readiness. The

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sources were selected purposefully rather than as part of a systematic review of the literature. The analysis is of undergraduate education in India.

The documents were read for content relating to vocational learning, practical experience, disciplinary choice, digital competence, interpersonal skills, entrepreneurship and industry engagement. The resulting themes were then compared against plausible learning mechanisms and likely delivery constraints. Tables 1 and 2 present the outcome of this interpretive exercise. There was no primary survey, interview or experiment conducted and no attempt at statistical causal inference. As only publicly available documents were used and no participants were recruited, human subject ethics review was not required.

5 Pathways from NEP 2020 to Graduate Skills

5.1 Vocational learning connected to the degree

Vocational education is generally seen as being separate from academic study. The NEP 2020 calls for that separation to be reduced. The value is in taking an actual occupational task and embedding it into the student's primary area of study, with the teacher then being able to link the task to the underlying theory. A commerce student might for instance use some commonly used software to prepare their accounts and then go on to explain the accounting decisions that were made in the entries. The software exercise would be assessing a very different skill to a written exam. That's an example of a course design, not necessarily an example of an actual course outcome at a particular institution.

Vocational modules can of course end up as nothing more than a series of short courses which are just picked up to meet credit requirements. They require appropriate kit, appropriately skilled staff and assessment against the work that is produced. Without those things a vocational module is not going to make any difference to what the graduate can actually do.

5.2 Internships and experiential learning

Internships are arguably the most direct route from university to work as they give students a real taste of deadlines, feedback and the reality of working in an organisation. The UGC have a framework of grants available for internships with industry, businesses and local partners (UGC, 2022). Take the example of a student being asked to look at a shop's stock records. If they're going to look for errors, talk the findings over with a supervisor and produce a brief report then they're going to be developing their analytical and communication skills as well.

This benefit is contingent upon the design of the placement. A good internship will have a clear task, a responsible supervisor, a record of the student's work and an assessment criteria. Reflection is also key in that the student should be able to articulate what went wrong, what they did about it and what they would do differently. Kolb's (1984) model provides a very clear justification for the inclusion of that final element. Colleges must not use the number of internship certificates as a proxy for evidence of learning.

5.3 Multidisciplinary choice and credit mobility

The ability to cross subjects can give students a far wider toolkit. An economics student may find data analysis useful; a biology student interested in health communication may find themselves in need of some writing and public policy knowledge. The UGC framework enables such combinations to happen more easily and credit arrangements can facilitate academic mobility and further study (UGC, 2022; MoE, 2023). The advantage is in combining subjects for a purpose rather than just amassing a range of unrelated electives.

Course counselling is absolutely key. Students need to know the entry requirements, what applications they're likely to get and what actual skills the course will give them. The colleges also need workable timetables and recognition agreements otherwise the courses that are on the prospectus may be very difficult to take. Flexibility is of limited use unless the student is able to use it.

5.4 Digital competence as applied ability

Digital competence needs to go beyond just being able to operate a device or complete an online module. Graduates are going to be working with spreadsheets, shared documents, online services, information management and in some cases AI. A good digital assignment might be to take a small dataset, clean it, assess the reliability of a source and then communicate a conclusion in plain language. It could also be an opportunity to assess the privacy implications or the limitations of an AI generated answer.

Access is the issue. Some students will be able to work outside of college on their own devices and with their own connectivity. Others will be reliant on lab access and shared facilities at the college. If the assessment is predicated on having constant access to technology then you're actually exacerbating the very inequalities you're

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trying to address in a course that's supposed to be about employability. The digital ambitions of the policy need to be matched with practical support for students who don't have the same access.

5.5 Communication and other transferable skills

Students will develop their interpersonal skills and their ability to work in teams most effectively when those skills are being practised in the context of the subject matter itself. A group presentation is far more worthwhile if every student is required to explain their reasoning and answer questions than if the assessment is primarily about the quality of the slides. The same applies to a case discussion; it's a far better way of assessing whether students can listen to each other, challenge each other in a constructive way and then go on to defend their conclusion with evidence.

The Mercer | Mettl report (2025) found benchmark attainment at 55.1% for communication, 54.6% for critical thinking, 46.0% for learning agility and 44.3% for creativity across its assessed universe. The variations clearly demonstrate why 'soft skills' shouldn't be viewed as a single, monolithic entity. Colleges can therefore establish distinct, measurable criteria for speaking, reasoning, problem solving and response to feedback.

5.6 Entrepreneurship and self-employment

Employment readiness should include the prospect of actually creating work. Business planning, market research and the basics of financial literacy can all be taught via small, achievable projects. A student team could go out and test the market for a service, put together a realistic budget and explain why their initial idea would have to be modified. The learning is there even if the exercise doesn't result in a business.

Entrepreneurship courses in themselves won't solve the problems of limited finance, uncertain demand or weak professional networks. Mentorship, the opportunity to meet local entrepreneurs and access to appropriate institutional support are all important adjuncts. Claims of successful start-ups must be assessed on their own merit separate from claims of improved entrepreneurial skills.

5.7 Industry and college collaboration

Industry co-operation can go a long way to help colleges to understand what the actual job of an entry level employee is. Employers can propose appropriate projects, can look at student work or can comment on the gaps they see during the recruitment process. A single guest lecture per semester is hardly evidence of a sustained partnership. A more useful relationship would be one in which the employer has a clear role to play in the design of the project, in the supervision of the project or in the review of the curriculum.

Such partnerships should also be tailored to the local context. A college in a small town might have very few large companies in the vicinity but could still have a range of opportunities available through hospitals, retailers, workshops, farms, local authority and community organisations. The practicality of the experience should be judged on the quality of the task and the quality of the feedback rather than on the stature of the organisation that it's provided by.

6 DISCUSSION

6.1 The difference between provision and outcome

Table 1 links the policy's principal openings to capabilities which colleges could plausibly develop. The final column is presented as evidence to be sought. Nothing in the list of proposed outcomes should be read as an outcome which has in fact been demonstrated by this study.

Table 1Policy Pathways and Evidence of Learning

Vocational modules	Practise tools and tasks within a discipline	Demonstration, work sample, practical rubric
Internships	Apply knowledge to supervised workplace tasks	Supervisor feedback, task log, reflection
Multidisciplinary electives	Combine methods from more than one field	Interdisciplinary project or portfolio
Digital learning	Use data and tools with sound judgement	Completed digital task and explanation
Communication courses	Present, listen and revise in response to feedback	Speaking and teamwork rubrics

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Entrepreneurship support	Test a business idea against real constraints	Budget, customer evidence, revised plan
Industry collaboration	Expose students to current professional standards	Externally reviewed work and curriculum changes

Note: Author's synthesis of Ministry of Education (2020, 2023), UGC (2022) and the relevant conceptual literature.

6.2 Why the available employability figure needs care

The 42.6% figure cited as the overall employability figure is of course a useful warning in terms of the gap in job readiness. It is not a national placement rate and should not be presented as any kind of assessment of the NEP 2020. Mercer | Mettl is benchmarking the candidates against its skill thresholds for the roles in question. The report has also re-calculated the 2023 baseline following a change to its methodology (Mercer | Mettl, 2025). A change in an assessment provider's dataset could be due to the composition of the candidates tested, to the hiring benchmarks or to wider economic conditions. There is no basis at all for claiming that the policy has had any impact on employability without a comparison between NEP exposed and NEP non-exposed groups.

A more robust institutional study would look at student performance both before and after the implementation of a particular curriculum, would ideally include comparable departments or colleges and would track the graduates beyond the point of their final exams. The placement data would be of course important, but so would the quality of the job, the level of retention, the amount of self-employment and the extent to which the work was relevant to the graduate's training.

6.3 Constraints that may interrupt the pathway

Table 2Implementation Risks and Practical Responses

Limited laboratory or digital access	Practice remains theoretical or uneven	Shared facilities and scheduled access
Faculty skill gaps	Courses rely on demonstrations, not student performance	Faculty development and industry exposure
Weak workplace links	Internships offer little supervised work	Defined projects and mentor agreements
Little course counselling	Students choose disconnected electives	Advising tied to skills and interests
Certificate-led assessment	Completion is mistaken for competence	Rubrics, work samples and portfolios
Unequal student resources	Costs and connectivity restrict participation	Targeted access and flexible support

Note: Analytical implications arising from the policy delivery requirements; not measured effects in a college sample.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COLLEGES AND DECISION MAKERS

The first priority is to link course design to evidence of student performance. You could start off with a small number of disciplines and simply ask the local employers what the entry level tasks are that students find difficult. The faculty can then take those tasks and turn them into assignments that map onto the academic objectives. An accounting student might be asked to reconcile a small set of records, a social science student might be asked to design and explain a simple field survey. The employers can assess the realism of the assignment but the actual academic assessment should be clear and fair.

Internship quality needs to be equally straightforward. Prior to the placement commencing the student, college co-ordinator and host organisation should agree on a realistic task and a named supervisor. At the end of the placement the student should submit evidence of work, a reflection on what they have learned and feedback from the host. A common rubric across all placements will ensure that the outcomes are comparable and will discourage certificate-only participation.

Institutions should be investing in faculty development and course guidance rather than simply adding more course titles. The staff need the time to learn the new tools and to rework the assessments. The students need guidance on combinations of courses, the extent of credit transfer and the opportunities that are available in the

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local labour market. In the absence of industry partners colleges can go and build practical projects with public services, small businesses and the various community organisations.

Assessment and monitoring should be embedded in the reform. In addition to the traditional exams, colleges could be looking at sample student portfolios, practical demonstrations and internship reports. There should be alumni follow up at graduation and at various points thereafter to track employment, further study, self-employment and difficulties in securing employment. The data should be broken down by subject and student group so that the average masks any unequal access. The reports must be able to distinguish between participation, demonstrated ability and actual employment as these are different things.

8. LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

This is an interpretation of a set of documents. It is not an assessment of skill development in students, it is not an evaluation of individual institutions and it does not claim to establish a causal link between NEP 2020 and employment outcomes. The employer focused index described here is based on proprietary data and is not in any way a stand-in for the whole graduate cohort. The examples given are illustrations of what the practice might look like, not evidence of any programme having been assessed.

The next stage of research should be to look at colleges at different points in their implementation of the model and use the same skills assessments at the beginning and end of a course or an internship. Student, staff and employer interviews could go some way to explaining why some programmes are more successful than others. Longitudinal graduate surveys would be useful in distinguishing between what happens on the test in the short term and what happens in terms of employment, quality of employment and career progression in the longer term. Equity needs to be looked at explicitly too (access to devices, access to internships, access to mentoring, access to flexible course options etc).

9. CONCLUSION

NEP 2020 gives Indian institutions much greater scope to link the academic with the applied. Its strength is in the activities that students can actually do: applying knowledge in an internship, interpreting a decision on the basis of evidence, bringing together subjects for a specific purpose or testing a business idea against real world constraints. Credit systems and interdisciplinary courses will make it easier to facilitate these activities, but they don't guarantee that students will actually do them.

The one thing we can say with any degree of certainty is that it's conditional. If the colleges have the right resources, have capable teachers, have properly supervised practical work and have assessments which actually test real competence then NEP aligned programmes could in fact improve the readiness of graduates for work. The employment impact is still to be seen. Colleges should therefore be judged less on the number of new courses and qualifications they produce and more on the quality of work that students can produce and the outcomes that graduates report.

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