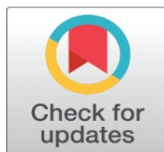


VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS IN INDIAN COLLEGE STUDENTS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF STUDENT EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS

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ABSTRACT

The transition from higher education to employment has become an important concern in India especially as employers are increasingly expecting graduates to demonstrate not only disciplinary knowledge but also transferable employability competencies. Therefore, vocational education, practical learning, internships and industry engagement have attracted more attention in Indian higher-education policy. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 explicitly advocates the integration of vocational education into mainstream higher education and emphasizes internships and experiential engagement with industry and other workplaces as pathways for students to combine academic learning with employability skills. Government Portal+1 Education

The present qualitative study explores the perception of Indian college students toward vocational education and its contribution to employability skills. It focuses specifically on students' experiences in practical learning, communication, teamwork, problem-solving, digital competence, career confidence, internships and industry exposure. Vocational education can enhance employability by equipping students with occupation-specific knowledge and creating opportunities for students to practice communication, teamwork, problem-solving, self-management, and workplace adaptation. But the effectiveness of vocational education is affected by the quality of practical learning, the involvement of industry, the support of institutions and the students' understanding of career paths.

Keywords: Vocational Education, Employability, College Students, Higher Education, Skill Development, Internships, Industry Exposure, Qualitative Research, India, Career Preparedness

1. INTRODUCTION

The expansion of higher education in India over the last two decades has created both opportunities and challenges for young people making the transition from education to employment. A university degree offers knowledge in a discipline but modern jobs increasingly require graduates to show that they have a blend of technical, interpersonal, digital and career-management skills.

This situation has generated more interest in the relationship between higher education and employability. Employability is not simply about getting that first job. It is the knowledge, skills, attitudes and personal resources that enable people to get a job, do it well, adapt to new demands in the workplace and continue to develop

their career. Vocational education is one of the possible ways to strengthen this transition.

The Ministry of Education has also stressed the importance of curricular support, the integration of vocational education and stronger links between academia and industry to improve student employability. Government Education Portal Indian research reveals these difficulties. A qualitative study of government ITIs in Mumbai, involving students, staff and employers, identified six mechanisms through which ITIs influenced graduate employability: knowledge and skill acquisition, changes in student attitudes and expectations, apprenticeships, signaling of graduate characteristics, intermediation between graduates and industry, and development of social networks.

These studies show that quantitative measures may not be enough to capture how students understand vocational education and its relation to employability. The present qualitative study therefore focuses on students' experiences and perceptions.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The study seeks to:

- 1) Indian college students' perceptions of vocational education
- 2) Understand students' experience of vocational and hands-on learning
- 3) To investigate students' perceptions of the development of employability skills in vocational education.
- 4) Exposure to the Industry and the Perceived Role of Internships
- 5) Identify barriers to students acquiring employment-related competencies.
- 6) See how vocational education influences students' career confidence and career planning.
- 7) Propose measures to strengthen vocational education in Indian higher education

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This is because the aim is to understand how students construct meaning around vocational education and employability rather than measuring a predetermined relationship between variables.

4. RESEARCH DESIGN

A qualitative exploratory design is suggested.

The primary data collection instruments are:

- 1) semi-structured individual interviews; y/o
- 2) focus group discussions.

Source: sampled

Participants must be Under Graduate students studying in any college or University of India.

The sample should include students with different levels of exposure to the vocational, for example:

- students on vocational degree programs;
- vocational electives taken by students;
- students who have completed skill development courses;
- students who have done internships; and
- Students with little or no vocational experience.

Sample Size. For an interview-based study, a number of student participants in the region of 20–30 can generate a significant amount of qualitative material. The final sample should be determined not by a specific numerical rule, but by information power or thematic sufficiency.

5. DATA COLLECTION

The semi-structured interviews will take about 30–60 minutes to complete.

The interviews will be conducted in English, Hindi or any other language known to the participants. Interviews conducted in a language other than English should be carefully translated so that the meaning of what participants said is preserved.

5.1. RESULTS PROPOSED

This theme would imply that students do not necessarily consider vocational education as an alternative to academic learning. Instead, they may see it as a way to use what they learn in school.

This reading is in line with NEP 2020's emphasis on practical exposure and internships in higher education.

Employability is more than just technical skills

Workplace realism through internships

Internships are especially valuable because they expose students to, students might say:

- professional communication;
- disciplinary action;
- time restrictions;
- organizational culture;
- interaction with customers;
- working as a team;
- solving practical problems; and
- Employer's expectations.
- absence of practical equipment;
- Training time is limited;
- obsolete curriculum;
- no interaction with industry;
- lack of trained trainers;
- vocational subject theoretical teaching;
- limited internship opportunities; and
- poor placement support.

5.3. SOCIAL PERCEPTION AND CAREER IDENTITY

Another possible theme is about the social status of vocational education from the point of view of students.

Some students may think that vocational education is very practical and job-oriented, while others may feel pressured to take traditional academic degrees.

This issue is of historical significance in India. One of the reasons for this limited integration of vocational education in the education system is the perception of vocational education as inferior to mainstream education, which NEP 2020 itself admits.

Thus, students may establish two parallel routes of vocational education:

5.4. VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AS A PATHWAY TO EMPLOYMENT

A real study would explore the effect of these competing perceptions on students' educational choices and career identities.

5.5. CROSS-CUTTING THEME: CAREER CONFIDENCE SKILLS

The themes also raise important analytical questions, including whether the acquisition of skills does indeed change students' perceptions of their future careers.

Vocational education influences employability through at least three interconnected pathways:

Skills

→ students learn to do activities

Work Experience

→ students learn how these skills are used in workplaces.

Trust

→ students are more able to imagine themselves participating in employment.

We should not take this pathway for granted, but validate it with real accounts of participants.

Previous studies of engineering graduates in India have also explored the relationship between career planning and locus of control and perceptions of employability, indicating that employability has psychological and career-orientation dimensions, apart from skills.

6. DISCUSSIONS

The qualitative perspective of this study implies that the relation between vocational education and employability should be understood as a process and not as a simple input-output relation.

Vocational education is not the same as employability. Instead, students will be exposed to specific learning settings that can provide varying chances to build technical and transferable skills.

It is particularly important to distinguish between exposure and meaningful participation.

A student may technically complete an internship, but learn little if the internship consists of observation only and no substantive responsibilities. In contrast, a short but well-supervised working experience can provide substantial learning.

The same goes for a curriculum with an occupational course. The quality of teaching, equipment, assessment, employer input and the opportunities to practice over and over can shape the learning experience.

This interpretation is consistent with qualitative research on ITIs in Mumbai that identified several mechanisms linking vocational education to employability: apprenticeship, industry intermediation, and social networks.

Students may learn skills that are formally part of a curriculum but feel that employers expect additional competencies.

This theme has direct relevance to NEP 2020 which identifies internships with industry and other organizations as opportunities for students to engage with practical learning and enhance employability.

- pupils;
- faculty;
- vocational instructors;
- companies;
- professional associations.
- policy makers.

Such dialog can help to ensure that vocational education is educationally meaningful and occupationally relevant.

7. SUGGESTIONS

The following should be considered in future research and institutional practice based on the literature and proposed analytical framework:

- 1) More real-world, practical learning. Vocational education should provide for opportunity to practice skills and not just learn about them.
- 2) Enhance the quality of internships. Internship programs should have clear learning objectives, supervision and meaningful responsibilities in the workplace.
- 3) Increase industry involvement. Employers should be involved in curriculum development, mentoring and workplace-based learning.
- 4) Include transferable skills. Communication, teamwork, problem-solving and digital competence should be embedded in vocational subjects and not taught as separate add-on courses.
- 5) Strengthen career guidance. Students need information about occupational pathways, qualifications, employment opportunities and career progression.
- 6) Strengthen vocational infrastructure. Colleges must have proper equipment, software, laboratories and workshops.
- 7) Tackle social perceptions. Institutions need to educate students, parents and communities about the educational and career value of vocational pathways.

- 8) Conduct longitudinal studies. Follow-up studies should follow students from vocational education into employment to investigate whether perceived employability translates into real labor market outcomes.

8. CONCLUSIONS

Vocational education can potentially help strengthen employability among Indian college students. But its contribution should not be viewed as merely the acquisition of technical skills specific to the occupation.

The qualitative view developed in this paper shows the inter-related importance of practical experience, transferable skills, industry exposure, career awareness and confidence.

These links are increasingly supported by Indian education policy. The NEP 2020 promotes better integration of vocational education into mainstream education and places a special emphasis on practical learning and internships to enhance employability. Government Portal of Education

At the same time, existing Indian research shows that vocational education faces challenges related to industry linkages, training quality, institutional resources and social perceptions. Taylor & Francis Online +1

The main implication is that the effectiveness of vocational education does not just depend on whether a vocational course is present or not, but on what students actually experience in the course.

A high quality vocational education system should provide students with opportunities to learn, practise, receive feedback, engage with workplaces, develop professional identities and understand potential career pathways.

Future qualitative research should pay special attention to the voices of students, but also involve employers, educators and policymakers. The multi-perspective research can help to identify how vocational education can be more responsive to Indian higher education and employment changing requirements.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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