

# Employability In Indian Education Under NEP 2020 In the Age of Artificial Intelligence

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**Abstract**—The question of graduate employability has emerged as a defining concern within contemporary Indian education, particularly in the context of the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) and the rapid expansion of Artificial Intelligence (AI) within global labour markets. This paper examines whether current educational reforms are effectively transforming India’s traditionally degree-oriented system into one that prioritizes skill development and employment readiness. Drawing upon theoretical perspectives on employability, including relational and competency-based approaches, the study situates NEP 2020 within broader debates on educational transformation and workforce preparedness. The analysis combines policy evaluation with evidence from institutional reports, labour-market statistics, and studies on curriculum practices to explore the persistent gap between policy vision and ground-level implementation. Findings suggest that while NEP 2020 articulates an ambitious framework emphasizing multidisciplinary learning, vocational integration, and flexibility, structural challenges such as examination-driven pedagogy, industry-academia disconnects, infrastructural inequalities, and limited faculty readiness continue to restrict meaningful change. The paper argues that employability in an AI-driven economy must be understood as an evolving process involving adaptability, identity formation, and institutional ecosystems rather than merely the acquisition of technical skills. Ultimately, the study concludes that the success of education reform in India will depend less on policy intent and more on sustained institutional transformation capable of aligning educational practices with the demands of an AI-augmented future.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between education and employment has long occupied a central position in debates on development and social mobility in India. In recent

years, however, this relationship has undergone a significant transformation. The emergence of Artificial Intelligence (AI), automation, and data-driven industries has altered not only the structure of work but also the definition of employability itself. Traditional academic models that emphasized degree acquisition and examination performance are increasingly being questioned as labour markets demand adaptability, interdisciplinary thinking, and digital competence. In this context, the question confronting Indian education is no longer whether graduates can access employment, but whether the education system can produce forms of knowledge and identity that remain relevant within a rapidly evolving technological ecosystem.

The introduction of the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) represents a historic attempt to respond to these shifts by reorienting the Indian education system toward flexibility, multi-disciplinary, and skill development. The policy envisions education as a means of producing “engaged, productive, and contributing citizens,” emphasizing vocational integration, critical thinking, and lifelong learning (Ministry of Education). Yet, the extent to which these ambitions translate into institutional reality remains a subject of intense debate. Scholars have noted that structural issues such as outdated curricula, exam-centric learning cultures, and limited industry collaboration continue to constrain the employability outcomes of Indian graduates (Tilak; Holmes).

At the same time, global labour markets are being reshaped by the rapid advancement of AI technologies. Reports from institutions such as the International Labour Organization suggest that technological change will simultaneously displace

certain categories of work while generating new forms of employment requiring hybrid technical and cognitive skills (ILO). For India, a country characterized by a large youth population and expanding higher education enrollment, this dual transition presents both opportunity and risk. While AI-driven sectors promise new avenues of economic growth, they also expose gaps between existing educational practices and emerging industry expectations.

This paper argues that although NEP 2020 offers an ambitious framework for addressing employability through educational reform, the transition from policy intent to practical transformation remains uneven. The persistence of traditional curricular structures, institutional disparities, and implementation challenges limits the capacity of Indian education to prepare graduates for an AI-augmented economy. By examining employability through theoretical frameworks, policy analysis, and contemporary labour-market trends, this study seeks to interrogate the emerging debate surrounding education, skills, and professional identity in India.

Rather than treating employability as a fixed outcome, the paper conceptualizes it as a dynamic process shaped by institutional structures, social perceptions, and technological change. The analysis therefore situates NEP 2020 within broader discussions on graduate identity, skill formation, and workforce transformation, asking whether current reforms represent a genuine shift toward skill-oriented learning or a continuation of older academic paradigms in a new policy language.

## II. THE CHANGING MEANING OF EMPLOYABILITY IN THE AGE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Employability has increasingly shifted from being understood as the possession of technical knowledge toward a broader conception involving adaptability, identity formation, and lifelong learning. Earlier human capital approaches framed education primarily as an economic investment aimed at increasing productivity. While this model remains influential, contemporary scholarship argues that employability cannot be reduced to the accumulation of skills alone. Knight and Yorke's USEM framework emphasizes the interaction between understanding, skilled practices,

self-efficacy, and metacognitive awareness, suggesting that successful graduates must demonstrate reflexivity and contextual problem-solving rather than disciplinary knowledge alone (Knight and Yorke).

This shift becomes particularly significant in the context of Artificial Intelligence. AI-driven automation increasingly performs routine analytical and procedural tasks traditionally associated with graduate employment. According to the World Economic Forum's future-of-work assessments, demand is declining for purely repetitive cognitive roles while rising for skills such as complex reasoning, creativity, and socio-emotional intelligence. Consequently, employability now involves the capacity to collaborate with intelligent systems rather than compete against them.

Leonard Holmes further complicates the discussion by conceptualizing employability as a "process of identity warranting," in which professional legitimacy is granted through social recognition rather than merely acquired through credentials (Holmes). Within the Indian context, this perspective helps explain the paradox of expanding higher education enrollment alongside persistent graduate unemployment. While gross enrollment has increased substantially, employer perceptions continue to question the workplace readiness of graduates, indicating a disconnection between institutional certification and labour market validation.

The rise of AI intensifies this tension. Industry reports suggest that AI-related roles increasingly demand interdisciplinary profiles combining technical literacy with ethical reasoning and communication skills (NITI Aayog). This evolution challenges traditional disciplinary silos within Indian higher education, where curricula often remain isolated from real-world applications. Employability thus becomes a moving target shaped by technological change, employer expectations, and institutional adaptability.

Statistics further reveal the urgency of this transformation. The India Skills Report notes that national employability among graduates remains slightly above 50 percent, indicating that nearly half of degree holders struggle to meet market expectations (Wheebox). At the same time, AI-related roles command wage premiums and faster employment growth, reflecting a labour market that rewards flexible and digitally informed competencies.

In this emerging landscape, employability is better understood as a dynamic process rather than an endpoint. It involves the continuous negotiation between individual capability, institutional support, and structural economic shifts. The challenge for Indian education, therefore, is not simply producing more graduates but enabling learners to develop adaptive competencies that remain relevant in an AI-augmented economy. This redefinition of employability provides the conceptual lens through which NEP 2020 and its implementation must be examined.

### III. POLICY VISION AND THE PROMISE OF TRANSFORMATION UNDER NEP 2020

The introduction of the National Education Policy 2020 marked a significant attempt to reposition Indian education within a global knowledge economy increasingly shaped by technological change and evolving labour-market expectations. Unlike previous policy frameworks that focused primarily on access and expansion, NEP 2020 emphasizes flexibility, inter-disciplinary, and skill development as mechanisms for improving employability outcomes (Ministry of Education). The policy frames education not merely as credential generation but as a lifelong process intended to prepare learners for dynamic professional environments.

One of the most notable transformations proposed by the policy is the restructuring of curricular pathways toward multidisciplinary learning. The move away from rigid disciplinary boundaries seeks to break longstanding hierarchies between academic and vocational education. By allowing students to combine subjects across domains, the policy attempts to promote cognitive flexibility—a quality increasingly valued in AI-driven workplaces where hybrid skills are becoming the norm. The introduction of multiple entry and exit options and the Academic Bank of Credits further signals an acknowledgment that learning trajectories are no longer linear and that career development often involves continuous up-skilling.

A second major emphasis is the mainstreaming of vocational education. NEP 2020 sets an ambitious target of ensuring vocational exposure for at least half of learners by the middle of the decade. This reflects a long-standing concern that Indian education has

historically privileged theoretical knowledge while undervaluing applied skills, contributing to a mismatch between graduate capabilities and industry expectations. By integrating internships, practical exposure, and local skill-based learning into formal education, the policy aims to normalize vocational pathways and reduce the stigma attached to them (AICTE).

The policy's vision also aligns with broader global conversations around future skills. International organizations such as UNESCO and the World Bank emphasize adaptability, critical thinking, and digital literacy as essential competencies for economies undergoing automation. NEP 2020 echoes these priorities by advocating experiential learning, competency-based assessment, and digital integration across disciplines. In principle, these reforms represent a shift away from rote memorization toward deeper conceptual understanding and problem-solving capacity.

However, the policy's aspirational nature also raises critical questions. While NEP articulates ambitious goals, scholars have noted that policy success depends heavily on institutional capacity and interpretation at the state and university level (Tilak). Indian higher education operates within a highly heterogeneous landscape, ranging from globally competitive institutes to severely under-resourced regional colleges. Consequently, the ability to translate policy vision into consistent pedagogical transformation remains uncertain.

Moreover, the relationship between policy design and employability outcomes is not straightforward. Employability depends not only on curricular reform but also on broader economic structures, labour-market absorption, and institutional networks linking education to industry. While NEP 2020 positions itself as a transformative framework, its emphasis on flexibility and choice may produce uneven outcomes unless supported by systemic changes in teacher training, infrastructure investment, and industry collaboration.

Despite these uncertainties, the policy represents a significant ideological shift in the discourse surrounding Indian education. By foregrounding skills, multidisciplinary learning, and lifelong education, NEP 2020 acknowledges that the future workforce must operate in environments where technological disruption is constant. The critical

question, therefore, is not whether the policy presents a compelling vision, but whether the institutional ecosystem can realize it in practice. The following sections examine this tension between policy ambition and ground-level reality.

## VI. CURRICULUM AND CLASSROOM REALITIES IN INDIAN EDUCATION

Despite the ambitious reform agenda articulated in NEP 2020, the everyday realities of Indian classrooms reveal persistent structural challenges that continue to shape graduate outcomes. The central critique emerging from higher education research is that curricular transformation has progressed more slowly than policy discourse suggests. In many institutions, particularly state universities and affiliated colleges, syllabi remain heavily content-driven, with limited integration of application-oriented or interdisciplinary learning. As a result, the gap between educational delivery and labour-market expectations remains significant.

A defining feature of Indian education has historically been the dominance of examination-centric pedagogy. Assessment systems continue to reward memorization and procedural reproduction rather than analytical reasoning or problem-solving. Scholars argue that this evaluation culture discourages risk-taking and experimentation—qualities increasingly required in AI-influenced workplaces (Holmes). Even where curriculum reforms formally introduce project work or internships, implementation frequently reduces these components to symbolic requirements rather than meaningful learning experiences.

Data from employability surveys reinforce these concerns. The India Skills Report indicates that only slightly above half of graduates meet industry-defined employability benchmarks, suggesting that a large proportion of degree holders lack competencies expected in professional environments (Wheebox). Employers frequently report that graduates possess theoretical familiarity with concepts but struggle to apply knowledge in collaborative or real-world contexts. This disconnect is particularly visible in rapidly evolving fields such as data analytics, artificial intelligence, and digital services, where curricula often lag behind industry developments.

Another challenge lies in pedagogical delivery. Faculty workloads, limited training opportunities, and rigid administrative structures constrain the adoption of innovative teaching practices. Surveys examining digital learning readiness suggest that a significant proportion of educators lack confidence in integrating advanced technologies into instruction, thereby limiting the effectiveness of AI-enabled educational reforms (UNESCO). The issue is not simply technological access but pedagogical transformation: introducing digital tools without changing teaching philosophy does little to enhance employability outcomes.

Institutional inequalities further complicate the picture. Elite institutes in urban centers increasingly experiment with multidisciplinary courses, industry partnerships, and experiential learning models, while many rural or smaller institutions struggle with basic infrastructure and staffing shortages. This divergence creates a tiered educational landscape in which opportunities for skill development are unevenly distributed. The result is a widening disparity in employability, where students' professional prospects are shaped as much by institutional context as by individual achievement.

Curricular rigidity also affects non-technical disciplines. Arts and humanities students often encounter limited pathways to professional skill-building despite growing demand for interdisciplinary capabilities such as communication, ethical reasoning, and cultural analysis in AI-mediated workplaces. The persistence of traditional academic hierarchies between “professional” and “non-professional” disciplines undermines the broader employability goals outlined by NEP 2020.

Taken together, these realities suggest that the challenge confronting Indian education is not solely policy design but the deeply embedded institutional culture surrounding teaching, learning, and evaluation. While NEP 2020 seeks to encourage flexibility and skill integration, meaningful transformation requires shifts in assessment structures, faculty development, and curriculum governance. Without such changes, educational reform risks remaining confined to policy documents rather than reshaping the lived experiences of students and graduates.

## V. INDUSTRY, SKILLS AND THE PERSISTENT DISCONNECT

The question of employability in Indian education cannot be fully understood without examining the relationship between universities and the labour market. While policy reforms emphasize skill development and flexibility, industry reports continue to highlight a significant gap between graduate preparation and employer expectations. This mismatch has become more visible in recent years as technological change, particularly the adoption of Artificial Intelligence, accelerates the demand for adaptable and interdisciplinary skill sets.

Industry assessments consistently indicate that graduates often struggle with applied problem-solving and workplace readiness. Reports by NASSCOM and collaborative industry studies note that employers value analytical reasoning, communication, and collaborative capacity alongside technical knowledge, yet these competencies remain insufficiently developed in many graduates. The India Skills Report similarly suggests that employability rates vary widely across disciplines, with professional and technical courses demonstrating higher readiness compared to traditional academic streams (Wheebox). Such disparities reveal that curricular exposure to industry practices plays a significant role in employment outcomes.

The pace of AI adoption further intensifies this disconnect. NITI Aayog's roadmap on AI-driven job creation suggests that automation will reorganize rather than eliminate employment, generating demand for new hybrid roles that combine digital literacy with domain knowledge (NITI Aayog). However, many higher education institutions still operate on curricular cycles that update slowly, making it difficult for academic programs to respond quickly to evolving industry standards. As a result, employers frequently invest in post-hiring training programs to bridge competency gaps that education systems have failed to address.

Internships and industry partnerships, often cited as solutions, remain uneven in practice. While elite institutions maintain strong corporate networks, students from smaller colleges or rural regions encounter limited access to structured industry exposure. This unequal distribution of opportunity contributes to regional disparities in employment

outcomes and reinforces existing socio-economic inequalities. The issue, therefore, extends beyond skills alone toward institutional ecosystems that enable—or constrain—professional transition.

Employer perspectives also highlight deficiencies in so-called “soft skills.” Communication clarity, teamwork, ethical awareness, and adaptability are repeatedly identified as areas where graduates fall short. These capabilities are particularly important in AI-augmented workplaces, where human workers increasingly collaborate with automated systems and must make contextual or ethical judgments that machines cannot perform. The persistence of rigid classroom pedagogies and examination-driven evaluation limits opportunities for developing these competencies within academic environments.

The labour-market data reflects this tension. Although India continues to witness growth in AI-related employment, the International Labour Organization notes that youth unemployment remains a serious concern, indicating that educational expansion alone does not automatically translate into employment absorption (ILO). This paradox illustrates the distinction between educational attainment and employability—a distinction that policy reforms must address more directly.

Ultimately, the industry–academia disconnect represents a structural problem rather than an individual failure of graduates. Employers seek adaptive thinkers capable of continuous learning, while educational institutions often remain anchored to static disciplinary frameworks. Bridging this divide requires deeper collaboration in curriculum design, sustained internship ecosystems, and institutional mechanisms that allow academic knowledge to evolve alongside technological change. Without such alignment, the promise of NEP 2020 risks being undermined by persistent labour-market misalignment.

## VI. IMPLEMENTATION GAPS AND STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES

While NEP 2020 presents a comprehensive vision for transforming Indian education, the success of any policy ultimately depends on its implementation across diverse institutional contexts. India's higher education system is characterized by wide disparities in infrastructure, faculty capacity, and regional

resources, creating a complex environment in which uniform reform is difficult to achieve. Consequently, many of the challenges surrounding employability arise not from policy design itself but from uneven execution at the ground level.

A primary structural barrier is the digital divide. Although digital adoption has expanded significantly in recent years, access to reliable infrastructure remains unequal across regions. Rural institutions often face limited internet connectivity, inadequate digital devices, and insufficient laboratory facilities, restricting their ability to integrate advanced technologies into teaching. UNESCO reports highlight that digital inequality is no longer merely an issue of access but also of quality, referring to the capacity to engage with higher-order digital tools required for AI-based learning environments (UNESCO). This disparity risks producing a two-tiered workforce in which students from well-resourced institutions develop AI-related competencies while others remain excluded.

Faculty readiness constitutes another critical challenge. The shift toward multidisciplinary and skill-based education requires educators to adapt their pedagogical strategies, yet professional development structures remain inconsistent. Studies suggest that a substantial proportion of teachers lack adequate training in digital pedagogy and industry-integrated teaching methods. Without sustained faculty development, curricular reforms may remain superficial, with new policy language layered onto old instructional practices. In such contexts, innovation becomes dependent on individual institutional leadership rather than systemic transformation.

Administrative and regulatory constraints also complicate implementation. Universities often operate under affiliation systems that limit curricular flexibility and slow decision-making processes. Even when institutions attempt to introduce new courses aligned with industry needs, approval mechanisms and bureaucratic requirements can delay adoption. This structural inertia contrasts sharply with the rapid pace of technological change associated with AI and automation, creating a temporal mismatch between education reform and labour-market evolution.

Financial limitations further intensify these challenges. Achieving the infrastructure upgrades required for AI-enabled learning—including laboratories, computational resources, and digital

platforms—requires substantial investment. Critics argue that without sustained public funding, reforms may disproportionately benefit private or elite institutions, reinforcing existing inequalities within the education system (Tilak). The long-standing goal of increasing education expenditure to six percent of GDP remains a recurring concern in policy debates, highlighting the tension between ambitious reform agendas and fiscal realities.

Implementation challenges also intersect with social inequality. Students from marginalized communities often face compounded barriers related to language, digital access, and institutional support structures. While NEP emphasizes inclusion and equity, translating these principles into meaningful outcomes requires localized adaptation and targeted interventions, which are uneven across states and institutions.

Taken together, these factors demonstrate that employability-oriented education cannot be achieved solely through policy reform. Structural conditions—ranging from infrastructure and faculty readiness to governance and funding—shape how policy is experienced within classrooms. The gap between national vision and institutional capacity therefore emerges as a central theme in evaluating the potential of NEP 2020. Understanding these implementation dynamics is essential before engaging with the broader debate on whether educational reform is genuinely reshaping employability in India.

## VII. THE EMERGING EMPLOYABILITY DEBATE IN INDIAN EDUCATION

The discourse surrounding employability in Indian education increasingly reflects a broader tension between policy optimism and institutional realism. On one side, NEP 2020 represents a decisive rhetorical shift toward flexibility, interdisciplinarity, and skill-oriented learning, suggesting that the education system is actively responding to technological disruption. On the other, evidence from classrooms, labour markets, and institutional studies indicates that structural limitations continue to constrain the translation of policy ambition into measurable outcomes. The emerging debate, therefore, is not about whether employability matters, but about how it should be conceptualized and achieved within a rapidly changing socio-economic landscape.

A central issue in this debate concerns the meaning of “skills.” Policy discourse often frames employability as a technical challenge that can be solved through curricular redesign and vocational integration. However, theoretical models such as the USEM framework and relational perspectives on graduate identity suggest that employability involves deeper processes of self-efficacy, social recognition, and contextual adaptability (Knight and Yorke; Holmes). From this perspective, the challenge facing Indian education is not only skill development but the creation of educational environments that enable students to construct professional identities valued by employers.

The rise of Artificial Intelligence intensifies this conversation by reshaping labour-market expectations at a pace faster than institutional reform. AI-driven industries increasingly prioritize adaptable learners who can engage with uncertainty rather than merely execute predefined tasks. This reality complicates traditional education models that emphasize standardized curricula and examination performance. The emerging debate thus raises a critical question: can employability be institutionalized through policy frameworks, or is it fundamentally an emergent outcome shaped by broader social and economic ecosystems?

Another dimension of the debate relates to equity and inclusivity. While reform narratives often celebrate the opportunities created by digital transformation, critics warn that unequal access to infrastructure and quality education may reproduce new forms of exclusion. Students from elite institutions are more likely to benefit from multidisciplinary programs, industry collaborations, and AI-focused training, while those in resource-constrained settings may struggle to access even basic digital learning environments. Consequently, employability risks becoming stratified, reinforcing existing hierarchies rather than reducing them (ILO).

At the same time, industry voices increasingly demand deeper collaboration with educational institutions, arguing that curriculum redesign alone cannot bridge skill gaps without sustained engagement between employers and academia. This has led to renewed calls for co-designed learning pathways, internship ecosystems, and project-based models that align academic learning with workplace realities. Yet such collaborations remain inconsistent and often

concentrated within a small segment of institutions, limiting their systemic impact.

The emerging employability debate, therefore, reveals a shift from viewing education purely as a pathway to employment toward understanding it as a negotiation between policy intent, institutional capacity, and technological change. NEP 2020 provides a framework for transformation, but the debate highlights that policy alone cannot redefine employability without addressing cultural, structural, and economic factors shaping education in practice. Ultimately, the Indian case illustrates a broader global challenge: balancing innovation with inclusion while ensuring that technological progress does not outpace educational adaptation. The future of employability in India will likely depend less on singular policy interventions and more on sustained institutional experimentation, collaborative ecosystems, and a willingness to re-conceptualize learning as a continuous process extending beyond formal education.

#### VIII. CONCLUSION

The discussion on employability in Indian education reveals a complex transition unfolding at the intersection of policy reform, technological change, and institutional reality. NEP 2020 represents a significant ideological shift by moving away from rigid disciplinary boundaries and emphasizing flexibility, skills, and lifelong learning. Its focus on multidisciplinary education and vocational integration signals an acknowledgement that traditional degree-centric models are insufficient for an economy increasingly shaped by Artificial Intelligence. However, the analysis presented in this paper demonstrates that policy ambition alone cannot guarantee transformation.

The evidence suggests that the core challenge lies in the distance between vision and implementation. While the policy framework aligns with contemporary theories of employability that emphasize adaptability and reflective learning, everyday educational practices continue to be shaped by examination-driven evaluation, outdated curricula, and uneven institutional capacity. Industry reports and employability data indicate that graduates often struggle to translate academic knowledge into workplace competence, highlighting persistent

structural gaps between higher education and labour-market expectations (Wheebox; ILO).

Artificial Intelligence intensifies these pressures by redefining the nature of work itself. Emerging AI-enabled roles require interdisciplinary thinking, ethical awareness, and continuous skill renewal rather than narrow technical expertise. In this context, employability must be understood as an evolving process rather than a one-time outcome achieved through formal education alone. Theories emphasizing identity formation and social recognition reinforce this idea, suggesting that graduates must not only acquire skills but also develop the capacity to navigate changing professional environments (Holmes).

The Indian education system therefore stands at a critical moment. NEP 2020 provides a framework capable of supporting transformation, yet its success depends on addressing structural inequalities, strengthening faculty development, expanding meaningful industry collaboration, and ensuring equitable access to digital infrastructure. Without such systemic alignment, reforms risk producing uneven outcomes that benefit already privileged institutions while leaving others behind.

Ultimately, the emerging employability debate reflects a broader question about the purpose of education in an AI-driven era. Rather than simply preparing students for existing jobs, education must enable learners to adapt to unknown futures. The challenge for India is not merely producing graduates for the labour market, but cultivating reflective, skilled, and adaptable individuals capable of participating in a rapidly evolving knowledge economy. Whether NEP 2020 achieves this ambition will depend less on the policy itself and more on the collective capacity of institutions to reinterpret and enact its vision in meaningful ways.

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