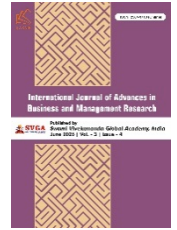




EMPLOYABILITY, QUALITY, AND INCLUSION IN INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR MANAGEMENT EDUCATION



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Abstract

In this paper, the problem of employability in Indian higher education is discussed with reference to management education. It adopts a conceptual approach by synthesising existing literature on employability, curriculum design, faculty capability, industry collaboration, digital transformation, and inequality. According to this conceptual synthesis, employability is influenced not by a single factor but by a combination of several interconnected variables, including curriculum relevance, teaching quality, industry exposure, digital preparedness, and students' socioeconomic status. The paper also notes a gap between policy intentions and actual institutional implementation, particularly in the areas of curriculum reform and inclusion. Following this synthesis, the paper constructs a conceptual framework that links institutional inputs to employability outcomes through skill development and learning processes, with socioeconomic inequality as a moderating factor. One of the strengths of the paper is that it goes beyond a limited skill-gap perspective, providing deeper insights into employability by integrating structural, institutional, and pedagogical aspects. Additionally, the paper highlights practical implications for policy, institutions, and industry, emphasising the need for coordinated, long-term actions rather than isolated efforts.

Keywords: *Employability; Higher Education Quality; Industry Collaboration; Management Education; Skill Gap; Socioeconomic Inequality*

Introduction

The growth of higher education worldwide since the end of the twentieth century has been immense, with India being one of the major contributors. According to Altbach [1], massification, internationalisation, and growing public demand have shaped global higher education, with nations such as India and China playing leading roles. However, this rapid expansion has brought significant challenges, particularly regarding quality and access. While India has witnessed increases in institutions, enrolment, and private-sector involvement, quality has not improved proportionally. Gupta [2] identifies quality-related challenges such as lack of uniform academic standards, inadequate infrastructure, and weak faculty development, while Deb [3] emphasises that these issues are systemic, rooted in governance, funding, accountability, and institutional capacity. Bhattacharya [4] critically analyses the National Education Policy (NEP), noting that despite ambitious reforms, it lacks a governance structure capable of addressing fragmentation and unequal institutional capacity. These studies highlight the interconnection between quality, policy, and institutional capacity, which must be considered together. Within this context, management education holds particular significance: MBA programs are key career pathways yet face persistent employability issues. Bhatnagar [5] observes an ongoing skills gap among Indian MBA graduates, arising from curriculum design, faculty competence, and teaching practices misaligned with industry expectations. Although employability challenges exist across disciplines, management education receives



greater attention due to its high relevance to the job market. Concurrently, Indian higher education policy increasingly emphasises inclusion and equity, with the NEP aiming to expand access for underserved groups and enhance quality and international competitiveness [6]. In practice, however, structural inequalities continue to shape access, participation, and attainment, suggesting that employability cannot be seen solely as a skills issue but is also influenced by broader institutional and social factors. This paper adopts a conceptual approach to synthesise existing literature and provide an integrated understanding of employability in Indian higher education, with particular emphasis on management education, moving beyond a narrow skills-gap perspective to examine the interaction of multiple factors affecting employability outcomes [7].

Objectives of the Study

- To examine the key factors influencing employability in Indian higher education.
- To analyse the interaction between institutional factors and employability outcomes in management education.
- To develop an integrated conceptual framework linking institutional inputs, learning processes, and employability outcomes.

Literature Review

The Employability Concept

A common issue in discussions of higher education is that the concept of employability is often conflated with employment. According to Cheng et al. [8], employment refers to obtaining a job, whereas employability encompasses the skills, abilities, attitudes, and preparation that enable a graduate to secure and maintain an appropriate position. This distinction is important, as employability is not measured by the number of placements. A student may obtain a job that is not commensurate with their qualifications, or a highly capable student may remain unemployed due to labour market conditions. Therefore, employability should be understood as a broader concept that includes both personal capabilities and external factors.

The Skill Gap

The skill gap is one of the most prominent issues in Indian higher education, particularly in management education. Bhatnagar [5] highlights that the challenges faced by MBA graduates in India are primarily related to skills, which are influenced by curriculum content, teaching quality, and opportunities for applied learning. This indicates that even professional programs may not fully equip students with the competencies required by industry. Unni [9] argues that the mismatch between graduates and labour market demands is not solely a curriculum issue but reflects broader structural challenges within the Indian economy and education system. Vishwakarma et al. [10] further emphasise that employability is a multidimensional concept and that preparation for it should extend beyond higher education. Collectively, these studies suggest that addressing the skills gap requires comprehensive strategies rather than the addition of a few new courses or training modules.

Gap between Curriculum and Industry

Curriculum–industry mismatch is another major challenge in higher education. Not all curricula are fully aligned with industry expectations [11], leading to gaps between what students learn and what employers require. In emerging fields such as fintech, Jackson et al. [12] illustrate that interdisciplinary learning—combining finance, technology, regulation, and analytics—is essential. This highlights that in management education, traditional subject teaching may be insufficient to prepare students for new work domains. Koseda et al. [13] further emphasise the need for Education 4.0 approaches, integrating digital tools, applied projects, and continuous curriculum updates. Collectively, these studies suggest that curriculum reform is more than a simple syllabus change; it requires institutional capacity, faculty engagement, and ongoing collaboration with industry.

Changing Skill Demands

The skills required by graduates are also evolving. Employability skills such as communication, adaptability, and continuous learning are essential for the twenty-first-century workplace [14]. In management education, students need

more than theoretical knowledge; they also require behavioural competencies, problem-solving abilities, teamwork, and the capacity for lifelong learning. These skills cannot be developed solely through traditional lectures and require dynamic teaching methods, including case discussions, projects, group work, reflection, and direct industry exposure. Consequently, assessments should extend beyond memory-based and written examinations to include practical and transferable skills, which are critical for institutions aiming to enhance graduate employability.

Faculty Potential and Excellence

The quality of higher education is closely linked to faculty capability. Gupta [2] highlights that challenges in Indian higher education, such as inadequate faculty development, inconsistent academic standards, and insufficient infrastructure, undermine quality. Deb [3] argues that quality improvement is a systemic issue, influenced by governance, financing, accountability, and institutional capacity. These findings suggest that curriculum changes alone are insufficient to enhance employability unless faculty are prepared to deliver new types of learning. This is particularly important in management education, where case-based learning, industry examples, applied projects, and interdisciplinary content require up-to-date faculty expertise and adaptable instructional practices. Additionally, Shahaida et al. [15] note that the concept of quality may be interpreted differently by various stakeholders. Therefore, quality reform must involve faculty, students, administrators, and employers, rather than being imposed merely as a compliance measure.

Pedagogical Change and Digital Transformation

Digital transformation is often seen as a potential solution for enhancing higher education, yet the literature presents a more nuanced picture. Fernández et al. [16] show that the adoption of digital technologies in higher education institutions is uneven, depending on leadership, infrastructure, and faculty preparedness. This suggests that simply introducing technology does not automatically improve learning outcomes. In management education, Ng et al. [17] note that online learning can increase flexibility and access but also poses challenges for student engagement, assessment, and the development of soft skills. Therefore, digital tools should support pedagogy rather than replace it. Without effective instructional design, faculty training, and student support, digital transformation alone is unlikely to improve employability outcomes.

Curriculum Interventions and Experiential Learning

Experiential learning plays a critical role in employability by linking theoretical classroom learning with practical experience. Padgett and Donald [18] demonstrate that specific curriculum interventions can positively influence students' self-perceived employability. However, this should be interpreted cautiously, as such interventions enhance students' confidence and expectations rather than directly improving employment rates. Downs et al. [19] highlight that internships provide opportunities to develop meta-competencies such as self-regulation, adaptability, communication, and problem-solving. The literature emphasises that applied projects and internships are beneficial only when carefully designed and properly supervised; poorly structured internships may be merely observational and fail to produce meaningful learning outcomes.

Inequality and Access

Inequality also plays a significant role in shaping employability. Choudhury and Kumar [20] demonstrate that in India, socioeconomic background strongly influences access to professional higher education. Disadvantaged students may face challenges related to school preparation, language proficiency, financial resources, networks, and entry to high-quality institutions. Gopinath et al. [21] further highlight the relevance of spatial inequality, as students from different regions may have unequal access to quality institutions, internships, and employer networks. This indicates that employability should not be viewed solely as an individual issue; students with the same degree can experience differing outcomes depending on the quality of institutional inputs and social support available to them. Raj [6] emphasises that while inclusion is a key objective of higher education policy, access alone does not ensure equitable outcomes without adequate academic, financial, and institutional support.

Industry Collaboration

Collaboration with industry is often recommended to reduce the gap between education and employment; however, successful collaboration cannot be achieved through a few isolated guest lectures or short-term activities. Vuoriainen et al. [22] identify six key conditions for effective higher education–industry collaboration: clarity, communication, commonality, commitment, continuity, and confidence. In practical terms, this means that institutions and industry partners must establish specific goals, maintain frequent interaction, share common interests, ensure long-term engagement, sustain continuity, and build trust. In management education, these principles are particularly relevant, as employability cannot be enhanced through one-off interactions alone. Curriculum design, internships, projects, mentoring, and skill assessments all require robust and structured partnerships between academia and industry.

Basic and Contextual Viewpoints

Several studies provide a broader perspective on management education and the quality of higher education. Baporikar [23] discusses the evolution of management education, emphasising that programs must respond to the changing demands of the economy and leadership. However, institutional structures do not always keep pace with external developments. Shahaida et al. [15] note that quality is not a fixed concept and may be defined differently by various stakeholders. Chauhan and Singh [24] analyse NIRF university rankings, showing that while rankings can encourage performance improvement, they may also prompt institutions to focus on outward indicators rather than internal learning and student development. Collectively, these studies reinforce the view that employability, quality, and inclusion are interrelated and cannot be considered in isolation. Table 1 presents a consolidated synthesis of the main determinants of employability identified in the literature.

Table 1: Consolidated Synthesis of The Main Determinants of Employability Identified from the Literature

Determinant	Key understanding from the literature	Supporting studies
Skill gap	There are skill deficits in management education that are associated with employability issues, yet there is more to employability than ability. It is also related to curriculum, teaching quality, applied learning and labour market conditions.	Bhatnagar [5]; Unni [9]; Vishwakarma et al. [10]; Cheng et al. [8]
Curriculum mismatch	Many programmes are not aligned with the needs of industry. For emerging sectors like fintech, it's a need to have interdisciplinary learning, digital knowledge, applied projects and frequent updating of the curriculum.	Krishna Mohan and Thandava [11]; Jackson et al. [12]; Koseda et al. [13]
Faculty and quality	Quality is about faculty capability. Training, support and preparation of teachers becomes necessary if the curriculum reform is to be successful; otherwise, it may fail to achieve its desired effects. There is also a different perspective on quality amongst different stakeholders.	Gupta [2]; Deb [3]; Shahaida et al. [15]
Industry expectations	In addition to technical knowledge, employers are now looking for graduates to be communicative, adaptable, able to solve problems, work as part of a team and constantly learn.	Tushar and Sooraksa [14]; Jackson et al. [12]
Pedagogy and experiential learning	Employability-related learning can be supported by practical teaching methods, internships and curriculum interventions. But to make this real learning, such activities must be suitably designed, supervised and reflected.	Padgett and Donald [18]; Downs et al. [19]; Ng et al. [17]

Digital transformation	Digital tools can help to facilitate access and flexibility; however, technology alone is not the key to better employment. Digital transformation requires leadership, infrastructure, faculty readiness and good pedagogy.	Fernández et al. [16]; Ng et al. [17]; Koseda et al. [13]
Inequality	Social and spatial disparities are experienced in terms of access to high-quality institutions, learning support, internships, and employer networks. So, employment prospects can vary even among students who have earned the same degree.	Choudhury and Kumar [20]; Gopinath et al. [21]; Raj [6]
Industry collaboration	The essential elements of good industry collaboration are clearly defined goals, frequent communication, shared interests, long-term commitment, continuity and mutual trust. A one-off activity is not sufficient.	Vuoriainen et al. [22]
System and policy context	While higher education has expanded access, there is still difficulty in terms of quality and implementation. Policy aims; rankings and institutional changes should look beyond visible indicators to learning outcomes.	Altbach [1]; Bhattacharya [4]; Raj [6]; Chauhan and Singh [24]; Baporikar [23]

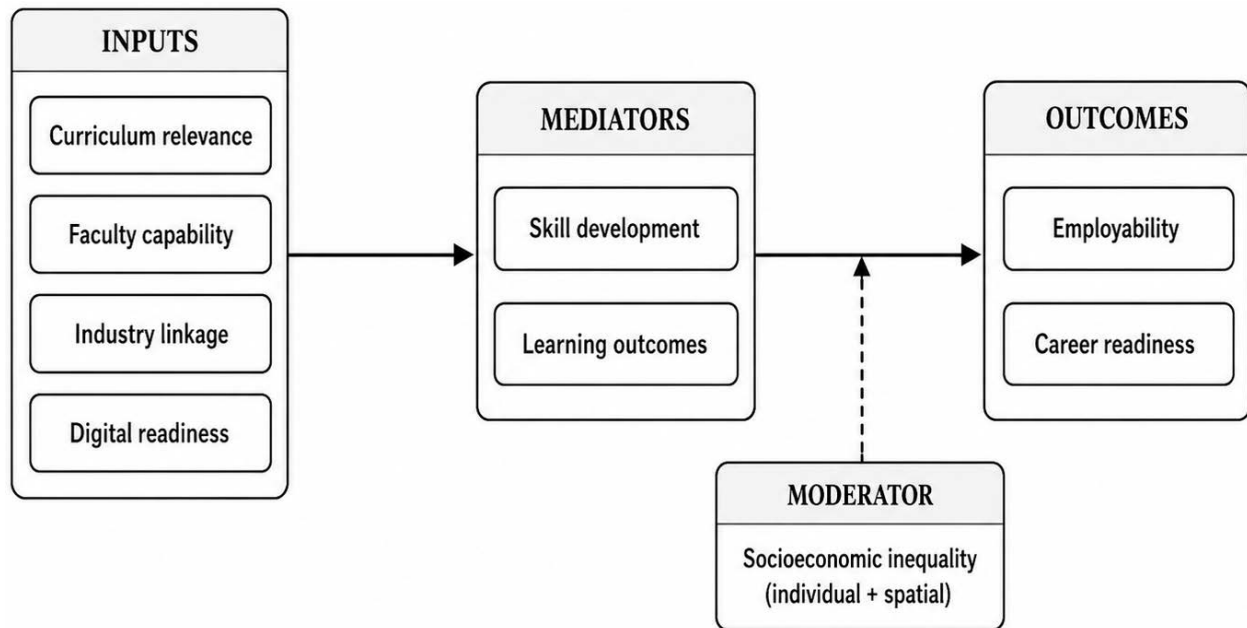
Source: Author's work

Methodology

This paper adopts a conceptual synthesis approach to examine employability, quality, and inclusion in Indian higher education, with a particular focus on management schools. It is not intended as a systematic review, nor does it aim to measure the magnitude of effects. Instead, the paper draws on existing literature to integrate relevant ideas into a conceptual framework. Studies were selected based on their relevance to four key themes: employability and skills, curriculum and pedagogy, higher education quality and policy [25], and inequality and inclusion. Both India-specific and international studies were included to explain concepts such as employability, digital transformation, experiential learning, and higher education–industry collaboration. The synthesis is qualitative in nature, emphasising common patterns, differences, and gaps in the literature. Given the diversity of methods, contexts, and theoretical perspectives, statistical comparison is not possible. The goal is to link findings conceptually and develop a framework for understanding employability in Indian management education. The paper has some limitations: it does not encompass all studies in the field, other disciplines may be underrepresented, and the synthesis reflects the author's interpretation, which others might organise differently. Nevertheless, these limitations do not diminish the conceptual contribution of the paper.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 presents the integrated conceptual framework derived from the literature.

Figure 1: Integrated Conceptual Framework of Employability in Indian Management Education

Source: Developed by authors

The framework presented in this study was developed from the overall conceptual synthesis, rather than from the four reference studies alone. The study first examined employability in Indian higher education, distinguishing it from employment and conceptualising it as a multidimensional construct encompassing skills, capabilities, attitudes, learning outcomes, and career preparedness [8]. It then synthesised literature on skill gaps, curriculum–industry mismatch, changing workplace skills, faculty capability, pedagogy, digital transformation, experiential learning, inequality, and industry collaboration. This synthesis revealed that employability in Indian management education is shaped by the interaction of institutional, pedagogical, technological, industry-related, and social factors, rather than student skills alone [2, 5]. Accordingly, curriculum relevance, faculty capability, industry linkage, and digital readiness were positioned as institutional inputs, as the literature links these factors to the quality of students’ learning experiences and work readiness [11, 16, 22]. Skill development and learning outcomes were treated as mediating mechanisms, explaining how institutional conditions translate into employability-related capabilities through teaching, applied learning, internships, projects, and assessments [14, 18, 19]. Socioeconomic inequality was included as a moderating factor, since students’ social background, financial position, language preparation, regional location, and access to institutional support can influence the extent to which the same institutional inputs produce comparable outcomes [6, 20, 21]. The logic of organising literature-derived variables into relational conceptual frameworks is further supported by other studies: Sheethal [26] integrates digital transformation, environmental proactivity, green innovation, and organisational learning to explain sustainable business practices; Raghavendra and Mg [27] link technological inputs with consumer experience, trust, and privacy concerns; Diddimani [28] groups psychological, social, economic, and contextual determinants into a framework explaining green consumer behaviour; and Raghavendra and Kumar [29] connect contextual factors, interpretive mechanisms, and outcomes in performance appraisal effectiveness. Consistent with this approach, the present study positions employability and career readiness as final outcomes, while acknowledging that the relationships are probabilistic, context-dependent, and not strictly linear [26, 27, 28, 29].

Discussion

The theoretical synthesis demonstrates that the concept of employability in Indian management education is influenced by several related problems. It cannot be attributed solely to one factor, such as curriculum, student competencies, or industry demand. Key tensions that arise from the literature are structured around the main discussion. The initial conflict is between reforms in curriculum and the real outcomes on employability. The most common recommendation to address

the skill gap includes curriculum reform. Although reforming the syllabus might not be a solution to enhance employability. As demonstrated by Bhatnagar [5], the issues of MBA employability are not merely related to the curriculum but also to the readiness of the faculty and the way they teach. Deb [3] further elaborates that issues of quality in higher education are systemic. This implies that curriculum reform will have little impact unless institutions enhance their faculty capacity, governance, and delivery systems. Thus, curriculum change must be seen as a component of a broader institutional change process. The second conflict is between the ambition and institutional realisation of policy. Bhattacharya [4] is concerned with the management of NEP-related reforms, and Raj [6] emphasises the inclusion focus of the policy. These concepts are significant, yet the problem lies in implementation. A policy can aim to enhance access, quality, and global standards, yet institutions might not be equally able to fulfil these objectives. Such a disconnect between policy intent and institutional preparedness is significant for understanding why reforms fail to generate anticipated outcomes. The third contradiction is between personal skill building and structural inequality. Discussions on employability tend to focus on the skills of the individual student. Choudhury and Kumar [20], and Gopinath et al. [21], however, demonstrate that socioeconomic background and location are also important in determining access and outcomes in higher education. Students from diverse backgrounds might not have equal quality of schooling, institutional support, language preparation, industry exposure, or employer networks. Thus, employability cannot be viewed as a purely personal issue; the impact of structural inequality shapes the advantages students derive from higher education. The fourth tension relates to digital transformation. Digital tools are often promoted as a means of enhancing access and employability. Nevertheless, Fernández et al. [16] demonstrate that digital transformation depends on leadership, infrastructure, and faculty preparedness. According to Ng et al. [17], online learning in management education has both advantages and disadvantages. It might offer flexibility, yet it can also create challenges in student engagement, grading, and the development of soft skills. Koseda et al. [13] advocate the necessity of Education 4.0, and the literature indicates that technology alone cannot serve as a panacea. Effective pedagogy, trained faculty, and equitable access to digital resources must accompany digital reform. The fifth tension is the distinction between employment and employability. Cheng et al. [8] draw a crucial differentiation between the two notions: employment is the process of securing a job, whereas employability is the broader process of acquiring, maintaining, and adapting to work. Placement numbers are often used as a measure of success in higher education debates, but this can be misleading, as placements do not necessarily indicate the long-term capabilities of graduates. Vishwakarma et al. [10] also caution against reducing higher education to mere job preparation. Employability, therefore, must be understood as a wider concept encompassing skills, confidence, adaptability, learning levels, and career preparedness. The sixth tension is the distinction among system-level, institution-level, and classroom-level evidence. Some studies focus on the higher education system, while others examine curriculum, institutions, or teaching practices. Altbach [1], Bhattacharya [4], and Deb [3] discuss broader system and policy issues, whereas Bhatnagar [5], Krishna Mohan and Thandava [11], and Koseda et al. [13] focus on curriculum and institutional concerns. Downs et al. [19] and Padgett and Donald [18] emphasise pedagogical or experiential learning interventions. These studies cannot be represented as a simple chain of cause and effect; rather, they show that employability is a multi-level process that develops simultaneously across different levels. Consequently, the conceptual framework in this paper should be seen as an analytical framework rather than a tested causal model. There are also gaps in existing research that need to be addressed. Critical concerns such as the transition between regional- and English-medium education, caste, gender, first-generation learners, student motivation, and aspirations should be examined more directly in future studies. These issues are particularly relevant to Indian management education, given the varying levels of language preparation, social capital, and institutional support among students admitted to professional programs [25]. Further empirical research is required to understand the impact of these factors on skill development and career preparedness. Overall, the discussion indicates that employability in Indian management education is a multidimensional issue, encompassing curriculum, faculty, pedagogy, digital preparedness, industry partnerships, and structural inequality. The literature does not offer a single solution but provides a collection of interrelated insights that can inform a more realistic understanding of employability and guide future research, policy, and institutional practice.

Implications

Policy Implications

The results indicate that policy reforms alone are insufficient to enhance higher education outcomes. Other measures must be effectively implemented, including adequate funding, monitoring, and accountability systems. Access should not be the only criterion for inclusion. Weaker students require additional support, such as financial aid, language

assistance, and bridge programs. Without these supports, increased access may not translate into actual success. Excessive emphasis on rankings should also be avoided in policy. If institutions focus primarily on improving rankings rather than fostering genuine learning and student development, the quality of education may suffer. The primary focus should be on enhancing quality, skills, and long-term outcomes.

Institutional Implications

Institutions must recognise that merely changing the curriculum will not resolve the employability issue. Faculty development is equally important. Educators should be trained to use practical and up-to-date teaching techniques, including case studies, projects, internships, and digital tools. It is also necessary to adopt interdisciplinary learning and flexible curriculum design. However, such changes require proper training, adequate infrastructure, and institutional support. Learning institutions should integrate practical experiences into education. Internships, live projects, and industry exposure should be structured and well-supervised to ensure meaningful learning.

Industry Implications

The industry must move beyond single, isolated interactions with educational institutions. Brief engagements, such as guest lectures or short-term internships, are helpful but insufficient for developing strong skills in students. Long-term, sustained partnerships between industry and institutions are essential. Both parties should collaborate on curriculum development, teaching, and assessment of student abilities. Strong relationships built on trust, frequent interaction, and shared goals can significantly enhance the overall employability of graduates.

Conclusion

The paper critically analyses twenty-three articles on employability, quality, and inclusion in Indian higher education, with a particular focus on management education. The synthesis suggests that employability emerges from the interaction of curriculum, faculty, pedagogy, digital readiness, industry collaboration, and structural inequality. No single factor fully explains the persistent issues in graduate preparedness, nor is there a single intervention likely to resolve them. The integrated conceptual framework developed in this study positions skill development and learning outcomes at the centre, linking institutional inputs to employability outcomes, while treating socioeconomic inequality as a moderating factor that shapes these relationships. The paper does not claim to resolve the debate; it draws on a limited range of literature and synthesises it qualitatively. Its contribution lies in moving beyond the prevailing skill-deficit paradigm, offering a nuanced explanation that acknowledges the systemic, pedagogical, and structural contexts in which employability is formed. The framework can be empirically tested in future research, including closer examination of the interplay between institutional inputs and inequality, and the role of industry collaboration in diverse contexts. For policy and institutional practice, this suggests that ambitious reforms must be supported by investments in the conditions—faculty, governance, partnerships, and equity—necessary for effective implementation.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

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