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## GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY: THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES

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**Abstract:** Employers believe that graduates are not job-ready and lack some of the most important skills needed for obtaining and retaining employment. The shortage of trained and adequately skilled graduates is emerging as a significant challenge to our nation. This paper makes an attempt to throw light on the responsibility of universities to embed employability skills into the curriculum to make the students job-ready. The two major tasks before every graduate are obtaining a suitable job and retaining it with the skills they possess. This paper makes an effort to explore the steps to be taken by universities to transform the graduates into the efficient employees. It also emphasizes the need for rejuvenating the Indian education system by developing a liaison between the industries and universities to embed employability skills into the curricula to promote the growth of the nation. It lays emphasis on the steps to be taken by the Indian government to bridge the skills gap and make its rich human resources job-ready.

**Keywords:** universities, skills gap, curriculum, employers, employability, employment

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It is a well-known fact that education makes people erudite and cultured and provides them the strength and audacity to face any problem in the society. Education improves our human, moral, cultural and aesthetic values and makes us live happily. But now-a-days people have several other causes to pursue the higher education. Universities are under constant pressure to plan and revise the aims of education at regular intervals to meet the needs of the students as their purpose of acquiring the education has been constantly changing from time to time. According to Kothari (1966), the Chairman of Indian Education Commission, the aims of the education in a democratic set-up are: a) increasing productivity b) developing social and national integrity c) making education modernized d) cultivating of social, moral and spiritual values. He recommended that universities shall give more importance to the increasing productivity than to the human values to build and strengthen the nation. Now it is on the agenda of every university to augment the employability of graduate students to enhance the productivity. Graduate employability has become a key objective of the government of India also. It is difficult to define or describe what employability is as it is complex in nature and multifaceted. Though it is difficult to define employability, many authors tried to define it and became successful to some extent. Possessing knowledge, skills and attributes to obtain a job and to do well in that job is called employability. The term, employability skills, can be interpreted in a number of different ways. According to Hillage and Pollard (1998), employability is

“about having the capability to gain initial employment, maintain employment and obtain new employment if required.”

Another definition offered by Yorke and Knight (2006) is

“A set of skills, knowledge and personal attributes

that make an individual more likely to secure and be successful in their chosen occupation(s) to the benefit of themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy”.

**Skill gap:** Employers complain that their novice workers are not job-ready and lack some of the generic skills needed for successful employment. The scarcity of well trained and adequately skilled graduates is emerging as a major challenge to the Indian government. Though the students of these days contemplate on acquiring the knowledge and skills from their first day of schooling till they achieve the degree, they do not possess the requisite skills to perform well at the world of work. The students do not focus on the required skills as they are put under the tremendous pressure to get through the exams with high marks. The skills, which they learn in their graduation, are not useful to them in the workplaces when they obtain the employment. A few decades ago, the students incessantly struggled to get the admission in their well-chosen course, acquire the knowledge and get through the exams with the best grades. They did not learn the skills which helped them in getting employment or the ability to work comfortably in their workplace. They learnt employability skills useful for getting a job during their transition period, the period in which they searched for a job, either through coaching centers or on their own. In the current scenario, the students are showing interest to acquire employability skills along with the core curriculum due to the demand from the employers. Now universities are under intense pressure to incorporate these sets of skills in the curricula as there is a huge demand for them. A debate is going on whether to embed employability skills into the curriculum. Some academicians and authorities believe that imparting employability skills is not the responsibility of universities. A few decades ago, there was a belief that these skills could

not be taught and had to be acquired on one's own. Earlier the students had no choice except learning the generic skills required at the workplaces on their own outside universities. They had to rely on the coaching centers mushroomed for the same purpose to get employment. But there were no institutes or colleges to teach the graduates on how to retain a job. They learnt the techniques of working to the satisfaction of their masters through experience. But now most of the students have a clear vision and an aim of achieving the job of their choice and retaining it. They plan their career from their first day of their graduation and start acquiring the requisite skills which are useful in getting the jobs. In the past, universities gave more importance to human and moral values than to employability skills and provided the facilities for research. Universities changed their stand and strategy due to the change in the global trends and demand from the students and employers. Education in universities: Education system was well developed during the Vedic period in India. The saintly gurus taught their disciples the Vedas and the Upanishads as those scripts were considered divine. The one who learnt the Vedas was considered knowledgeable and respected in the society. In the medieval period, astronomy, theology, medicine, law and some other functional skills were taught to the students. Western education was introduced during the British Raj. After independence, Indian government gave much importance to the higher education and established several universities to educate the people. Till the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, universities offered a few conventional courses leaving a little chance to the students to choose the course they like. But now universities offer a wide range of courses with various combinations of the subjects. Now it has become the responsibility of universities to impart the work-based training to the students along with the core curriculum and provide them the job opportunities. Hence the students, before joining the course, have to do a little bit of research to choose the course which provides them the job opportunities. Before the advent of mass higher education, higher education was available only to some fortunate people. The government of India invested a large sum of money to the educational sector to educate its rich human capital and provide job opportunities to them. University Grants Commission declared that the total number of universities in India as on 11-02-2013 are 620, of which state universities are 298, central universities are 44, deemed to be universities are 130 and private universities are 148. More than half of these universities were established in the last ten years. When Indian government realized that the nation prospers and becomes the super power only if

it transforms its working force into skilled human resources, it liberalized its policy and gave permission to establish private and deemed to be universities to bring equality in the society and bring down the dependency ratio. Earlier, the competition was among the students only to perform well but now it is among universities also. The old universities have also started working hard and competing with the new universities to catch the attention of the students. These modern universities are taking several steps to map employability skills onto the curricula and provide the job opportunities through the campus placements to allure the students. The modern universities started offering several new courses in various combinations along with employability skills to cater to the needs of the students and meet the needs of the employers. Their prime focus is on providing the employment to the students soon after the completion of their graduation. The private and deemed to be universities are in the forefront and making their students settle in the jobs successfully. Now every university in India started giving more importance to these skills than to the human values to be ahead in the race. If universities do not change according to the needs of the students, universities will be neglected and will face the problem of getting endangered. Most of the employers look for the graduates who are job-ready as they are reluctant to spend their time and money for imparting such requisite skills due to the economic pressures or constraints they have. They expect their novice workers to possess several sets of useful skills and perform well from their first day at the workplaces. They blame universities if their new-hires do not possess the employability skills forgetting the fact that these people have a lot of talent as they have outperformed several competitors in the selection procedure. They believe that it is the responsibility of universities to provide the students the required knowledge, skills and attributes to bridge the skills gap. These reasons also made the curriculum designers and the university authorities to incline towards embedding the required sets of skills into their curriculum. The success of the IITs, NITs, IIMs and Business schools is due to the skills and job opportunities they provide to the students. The two major tasks before universities are identifying the essential key competencies and finding out the various methods of imparting them to the students. A lot of research has been done in identifying the specific employment related generic skills or competencies. A few decades ago, the students acquired the essential skills on their own as these skills were not incorporated in the curriculum. Many coaching centers burgeoned in the towns and cities

taught these skills to the students by charging heavy amount. But now the students have a choice and a chance to learn these skills along with the core curriculum in universities. According to Yorke and knight (2006), there is a spectrum of ways in which employability can be developed through curricula. The following are the ideal types through which employability skills can be taught to the students.

- Employability through the whole curriculum
- Employability in the core curriculum
- Work-based or work-related learning incorporated as one or more components within the curriculum
- Employability-related module(s) within the curriculum
- Work-based or work-related learning in parallel with the curriculum.

The role of a university: This is the right time for universities to focus on imparting the skills required at the workplaces, as demanded by the employers, to make India's human capital job-ready. Universities have to change the aims of education and improve the curricula keeping the trends in the global markets and demands from the employers to make the students fit for the employment. Every university shall be in regular contact with the employers to identify the common basic skills to be imparted to all the graduates and incorporate them in the curriculum. It shall provide the list of the skills to be taught in each semester or year to the students to enable them to plan their career in advance. It is its paramount responsibility to inform the students about the requirements of the workplaces from time to time so that there will not be any mismatch between the perceptions of the students and the perceptions of the employers. The curriculum shall be revised at regular intervals to ensure that the knowledge, skills and attributes acquired by students are pertinent and up to date. It is also the responsibility of every university to identify the skills which were not dealt in detail in the class rooms and provide facilities to the students for acquiring them after the completion of their graduation to avoid the skills gap. A committee or an independent body has to be formed in the university to interact with the industries to know their demands and requirements. University shall also take the help of the alumni in identifying the skills in demand and updating the existing ones at regular intervals. It shall help the students in providing the job opportunities through the campus placements. It shall provide the information about the facilities provided by the central and state governments for establishing the small and medium sized enterprises and encourage the students to establish their own entrepreneurship. It shall take up the live projects

and involve the students in them to provide work-related learning. It shall encourage the young graduates to become the entrepreneurs and help them in creating their own enterprises. It shall monitor the enterprises till they become successful and offer solutions to them if they face any impediments. The teachers have to play a vital role in this process. Now the role of universities is not only imparting essential skills to the students but also giving training to the teachers on how to impart these skills effectively. The teachers shall involve the students in pair work and group work activities to facilitate them communicate in English with their peer group. The teachers shall make the students participate in seminars, conferences and extra-curricular activities to make them acquire interpersonal skills. The teachers have to change the pedagogic style from the teacher-centric method to the student-centric method to give their students sufficient time to think and respond in the class rooms. Advantages of employability skills: The graduates can pursue their education with an aim and a hope to achieve it. They do not have to put their efforts in identifying the skills, as universities take up this responsibility and revise the curriculum at regular intervals to incorporate the latest changes in the global markets. They can plan their career at an early stage and make their dreams come true. They will get motivated to attend the classes regularly and participate in all the activities in the colleges ardently as their chance of getting employment is amplified. They will have brighter chances of getting employment and work to the satisfaction of their masters. They can also have a chance to check and revise their targets if they believe that the skills they have acquired are not suitable for obtaining or retaining their dream job. The demands of the employers will be fulfilled, if the students are taught the essential key competencies along with the core curriculum. Employers don't have to train the beginners as they are adequately trained in universities to meet the industry requirements. They don't have to spend a lot of time and money for training the new-hires as they are job-ready. The interaction between the employers and the academia enhances the job opportunities to the graduates and provides the skillful employees to the employers. Steps taken by the government: The growth of every nation is inherently linked to its human resources. India is rich in human resources. India flourishes and becomes a developed nation, if it makes them job-ready or provides facilities to them to establish small and medium size enterprises. The government of India is serious in its efforts to identify and provide the skills to its human capital. The development of the skills in India is monitored by a) Prime Minister's

Nation Council b) National Skill Development Co-ordination Board and c) National Skill Development Corporation. India is undergoing major economic and technological changes based on the policy of liberalization, globalization, privatization and computerization while ensuring the development of rural and backward classes. In the current scenario, the educated human resource, which is equipped with the latest knowledge and skills, is in greater demand for participation in the social and economic development of the country. Indian government has entrusted powers to the Ministry of Human Resources Development and University Grants Commission to extend their support to universities in establishing the facilities to bridge the skills gap and provide the facilities for Research and Development. MHRD and UGC believe that providing the right knowledge and skills to the youth can ensure the overall national progress and economic growth. The Indian education system recognizes the role of education in instilling the values of secularism, social equality, respect for democratic traditions and civil liberties and quest for justice. It is also being predicted that India will see a sharp decline in the dependency ratio over next thirty years which will constitute a major demographic dividend for India if the trained teachers impart the necessary skills to the

young people. These people should be considered a precious asset, as they contribute a lot to the development of the national as well as the global economy. The 12<sup>th</sup> Five year plan envisages many ambitious projects to rejuvenate the higher education system for the benefit of the students, the teachers and the socially disadvantaged. Education World Forum-2013, which was held in London, recognized the importance of collaborative efforts between government agencies and corporations in supporting learning. It is a widely accepted fact that employability skills are essential to sustain development in the knowledge- driven economy. This is the right time to rejuvenate the Indian education system by developing a liaison between the industries and universities to embed employability skills into the curricula to promote the growth of the nation. As it is not possible to teach all the requisite employability skills to the students along with the curriculum, universities shall take the assistance of academia and other government agencies to identify the essential key competencies required at the workplaces. These skills have to be imparted to all the graduates before they leave universities. Universities shall provide the facilities to teach the graduates the additional skills or the latest skills through the special programs or certificate courses.

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