Research Article

Skill Development in Higher Education Institutions in India: An Empirical Study in the Context of the National Education Policy

V N R Sai Krishna Kari [1*], Shamim [2], K Z Krishna Teja [3], Sk Rizwana [4]

[1,2,3,4] Department of Computer Science and Applications, Kakaraparti Bhavanarayana College, Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh, India

Corresponding Author: *V N R Sai Krishna Kari

Abstract

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 positions skill development as a foundational objective of higher education in India. While policy provisions emphasise vocational integration, multidisciplinary learning, and industry collaboration, empirical evidence on institutional implementation remains limited. This study investigates the effectiveness of skill development initiatives in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) under NEP 2020 through a questionnaire-based survey of students and faculty members. Using descriptive statistics and factor analysis, the study identifies key skill outcomes, institutional practices, and implementation challenges. The findings reveal moderate progress in curriculum flexibility and vocational exposure, alongside persistent gaps in industry engagement and faculty preparedness. The study contributes empirical insights for policymakers and HEIs seeking to strengthen employability-oriented reforms.

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KEYWORDS: Skill development, Higher Education Institutions, NEP 2020, employability, vocational education, India.

1. INTRODUCTION

India's higher education system has expanded rapidly over the past two decades; however, employability outcomes have not kept pace with enrollment growth. Several national surveys and employer reports highlight deficiencies in practical skills, digital competence, and workplace readiness among graduates [1], [2]. This mismatch has intensified in the context of automation, artificial intelligence, and evolving occupational structures.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a structural shift in educational planning, placing skill development and experiential learning at the core of higher education reform [3]. Unlike earlier policies, NEP 2020 emphasizes multidisciplinary education, vocational integration, flexible curricular pathways, and industry collaboration as mechanisms to enhance workforce readiness [4]. While policy discourse is extensive, empirical assessments of how HEIs are implementing these reforms remain limited.

This study empirically examines skill development initiatives in HEIs under NEP 2020, focusing on institutional practices, perceived skill outcomes, and implementation challenges.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Skill development has been widely recognized as a determinant of graduate employability and economic competitiveness [5]. Human capital theory suggests that education systems must continuously adapt to labor market demands to remain effective [6].

Studies on Indian higher education indicate a persistent gap between academic instruction and industry expectations, particularly in applied and soft skills [7]. NEP 2020 seeks to address this gap by integrating vocational education into mainstream higher education and promoting competency-based learning [3].

Empirical research by Reddy et al. validated employability-related skill dimensions aligned with NEP objectives, including cognitive, social, and technical competencies [8]. Similarly, Jan and Khurshid emphasized that vocational integration within degree programs enhances employment outcomes when supported by institutional capacity [9]. However, scholars have also noted challenges related to faculty readiness, infrastructure limitations, and uneven industry participation [10].

The present study extends existing literature by providing primary data-based evidence on NEP-aligned skill development practices in HEIs.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study aims to:
Examine the extent of skill development initiatives implemented in HEIs under NEP 2020.
Assess perceived skill outcomes among students.
Identify institutional and structural challenges in implementation. Analyse the relationship between curriculum design and employability skills.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
4.1 Research Design

A descriptive empirical research design was adopted using a structured questionnaire.

4.2 Sample
The study surveyed 210 respondents, comprising:
➢ 150 undergraduate and postgraduate students
➢ 60 faculty members from public and private HEIs in South India.

4.3 Instrument
A structured questionnaire was developed based on NEP 2020 skill provisions and prior validated instruments [8]. It consisted of four sections:
➢ Demographic profile
➢ Curriculum and vocational exposure
➢ Skill outcomes
➢ Implementation challenges
Responses were measured on a five-point Likert scale.

4.4 Data Analysis
➢ Data were analysed using:
➢ Descriptive statistics
➢ Mean score analysis
➢ Exploratory factor analysis (EFA)

5. Data Analysis and Results
5.1 Skill Development Initiatives in HEIs

Dimension	Mean Score
Curriculum flexibility	3.92
Internship opportunities	3.68
Vocational courses	3.51
Industry collaboration	3.12

The findings indicate that curriculum flexibility and internships are relatively better implemented, while industry collaboration remains weak [3], [10].

5.2 Perceived Skill Outcomes
Factor analysis revealed four dominant skill dimensions:
➢ Cognitive and analytical skills
➢ Digital and technical skills
➢ Communication and teamwork
➢ Employability readiness
These dimensions align with NEP 2020's emphasis on holistic skill development [4], [8].

5.3 Implementation Challenges
➢ Respondents identified:
➢ Lack of trained faculty (Mean = 4.01)
➢ Insufficient industry partnerships (Mean = 3.89)
➢ Limited infrastructure for skill labs (Mean = 3.76)
➢ These challenges corroborate earlier policy critiques [7], [10].

6. DISCUSSION
The empirical findings suggest that NEP 2020 has initiated measurable changes in HEIs, particularly in curriculum design

and experiential learning. However, the uneven implementation across institutions highlights structural and resource-based constraints. The moderate mean scores for vocational exposure indicate that policy intent has not yet translated into universal practice [3], [9].

Faculty preparedness emerges as a critical determinant of success, reinforcing the need for continuous professional development and industry immersion programs [11].

7. Implications for Policy and Practice

The study suggests that:

➢ HEIs must institutionalise skill development through dedicated centres.

➢ Industry collaboration should be incentivized through policy mechanisms.

➢ Assessment systems must shift toward competency-based evaluation.

➢ Faculty development should be prioritized for sustainable reform.

8. CONCLUSION

This empirical study demonstrates that NEP 2020 has laid a robust policy foundation for skill development in Indian higher education. While early implementation shows positive trends, systemic challenges persist. Addressing these gaps requires coordinated efforts among HEIs, industry, and policymakers. Strengthening skill development within higher education is essential for enhancing graduate employability and supporting India's long-term economic aspirations.

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About the corresponding author

V. N. R. Sai Krishna Kari is an academic professional in the Department of Computer Science and Applications at Kakaraparti Bhavanarayana College, Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh, India. His interests include computer applications, programming, and information technology education, with a focus on teaching, research, and academic development.