

Employability of Youth in India: Why Skill Matters

Mukta Mani

Abstract

Globalisation, the knowledge economy, and rapid technological changes are rewriting the economic chapters of countries across the globe. A nation that possesses a skilled and productive workforce will have a competitive edge over others. India has emerged as the fourth-largest economy (IMF, July 2025) and already benefits from a rich demographic dividend. However, a large working-age population becomes an asset only when it is employed optimally and productively. Several studies report that the country's education and workforce development systems have been struggling to prepare job-ready and world-ready youth. A wide gap exists between the skills required for the job market and the skills possessed by our graduates. Although the government is making constant efforts to prepare skilled manpower, there is still a dire need to rethink and redesign the higher education and skilling ecosystems to make the nation's youth and graduates employable. This article examines the concept of employability in the current context, the skills required to excel in the market, the persisting skill gap, and how that gap can be bridged.

Keywords

Employability, Skill, Skill Gap, Knowledge economy.

Introduction

The world is in a state of flux; the knowledge economy and knowledge-intensive industries (KII) have become the latest buzzwords. Globalisation and technological changes, especially the growing impact of Artificial Intelligence, Machine Learning, and data sciences, have redesigned the course of the global economy. This has created both challenges and opportunities for economic growth, the service sector, and job creation. Consequently, the employability of youth has emerged as a major concern around the world. Promoting full and productive employment and decent work for all has been adopted as one of the Sustainable Development Goals (Goal 8 of the SDGs).

India has emerged as a major player in global affairs, and the country benefits from a rich demographic dividend. According to the Economic Survey 2018-19, the share of India's working-age population (20-59 years) is predicted to reach its peak at 68.9%, while the dependency ratio is projected to fall to its lowest point of 31.2% by 2030. This means that the country has a significant asset in the form of a higher proportion of its working-age population. In this context, a report by the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) released in April 2022, 'Harnessing India's Demographic Dividend for Boosting Growth', states that if these human resources are employed productively, India's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) could grow from the current \$3 trillion to \$9 trillion by 2030, and to \$40 trillion by 2047.

Furthermore, a recent study by the Observer Research Foundation, “The India Employment Outlook 2030: Navigating Sectoral Trends and Competencies,” indicates that India will remain the largest provider of human resources in the world, with about 24.3% of the incremental global workforce over the next decade coming from India (Bardhan, A. et.al., 2024). Thus, while other countries face a higher proportion of an ageing population, India has a distinct competitive advantage. However, if timely actions such as investing in new technologies or building industry-required skills are not taken, the skill deficit could cost the country US\$1.97 trillion in terms of gross domestic product (GDP) over the next decade (Accenture, 2019). Therefore, the size and age of the workforce, when complemented with employability skills and an entrepreneurial spirit, will decide the course of economic growth; otherwise, it could turn into a liability for our country.

Literature Review

Bano and Shanmugam (2020) state that India is moving towards becoming a ‘knowledge economy’ by focusing on the advancement of skills relevant to emerging market needs. The government at the central and state levels is making numerous provisions to skill the workforce and prepare them for the contemporary job market. However, other studies indicate a wide gap between the skills required for the job market and the skills possessed by graduates and youth. This is the main reason why our country has not been able to fully reap its rich demographic dividend. The education and workforce development system has been constantly struggling to prepare job-ready, world-ready youth (Dahiya, 2024; Ganeshan and Vethirajan, 2020; Sharma and Nagendra, 2016).

Further, there is a mismatch between labour demand and supply, both in terms of quantity and quality. The ILO (International Labour Organisation, 2019) notes that skills mismatch is one of the most crucial issues in employment policy debates in low and middle-income countries. Skill imbalances in the labour market are the biggest impediment to the utilisation of human resources (McGowan and Andrews, 2017; Palmer, 2017). Even the UN World Youth Report (2013) states that mismatched skills, insufficient job readiness, and limited access to decent employment hinder young people’s entry into the workforce and increase their vulnerability to working poverty and long-term economic instability (Sethy, M. 2025).

With the Fourth Industrial Revolution (IR4), the demand for a skilled workforce has become inevitable. But because of insufficient provisions or policies for constant skilling, upskilling, and reskilling of youth through sound education and training, there is a shortage of manpower for higher-skill categories and a surplus of labour for lower-skill categories or informal employment (De, S., Mukherjee & Ray, 2022). In the Indian context, Mehrotra and Parida (2019) argue that the country’s economic growth has not led to proportional employment opportunities for youth, largely due to a lack of industrial diversification and persistent skill mismatches. This is confirmed by a 2017 ILO report, which states that India is likely to face a shortage of 29 million skilled personnel by 2030. Jeemol (2016) states that there is a growing mismatch between skills/education and the job or occupation. Over-education and a quality skill gap are evident in today’s knowledge-intensive industries. Our country is under-skilled, and the skilling capacity of our educational institutions is inadequate, which leads to the large-scale informalization of our economy (Chanda, R. et.al. 2014).

A shortage of skilled graduates is a threat to the economic growth of the country. India's Employment Report, 2024, issued by the ILO, states that in India, nearly 82 per cent of the workforce engages in the informal sector, and nearly 90 per cent is informally employed. The share of informal employment has increased. The youth unemployment rate has risen with the level of education, with the highest rates among graduates. Das (2025) has examined the individual and socio-economic factors associated with youth unemployment and has confirmed the prevalence of informal employment among Indian youth. Until the wide gap between education and the industrial demands for skills is narrowed, unemployment among youth, particularly graduates, will continue to rise. Various government schemes and provisions have been made to tackle the issue of unemployment, but they often focus more on unskilled labour, while the long-term employability of the workforce remains neglected (Chinnadurai and Imam, 2025).

Aligning education with industry demands, strengthening rural skill initiatives, promoting green and sustainable jobs, upskilling and reskilling, and driving international collaboration are a few means to bridge the skill gap in India's workforce (Mariwal, S. 2025). Strategies for enhancing the skills of the workforce and providing formal recognition for informally acquired skills need to be strengthened (Agal, K. 2024). Reforming the curriculum and aligning it with industry requirements has become unavoidable. Skilling is a joint responsibility, and public-private cooperation must be considered to regulate and review skill development programmes. They must come together for the development of non-technical skills and to create a holistic skill environment for the youth (Patil and Charanthimath, 2021; Swain and Swain, 2020; Chanda, R. et.al., 2014). The Skill India effort needs to focus more on fostering entrepreneurial skills among the workforce. Jeemol (2016) has suggested that vocational training must start at the school level and technical education at the post-schooling and graduate levels. This will enable youth to develop the right skills and expertise right from their schooling.

According to the ILO's India Employment Report, 2024, skills training and active labour market policies (ALMPs) supplement and complement each other in overcoming the skills-supply and skills-demand gaps. For that, employers and educators need to be part of the policy formation that targets youth employment (Das, 2025). Educational institutions, particularly higher education institutions (HEIs), have a greater role to play. No doubt, these institutions can help minimise the skills gap between academia and industry. Pereira, Vila-Boas, and Rebelo (2020) stated that stakeholders, such as graduates/students, employers, and HEIs, must leverage their expertise to bridge the gap caused by the lack of soft skills among graduates. Thus, the above studies highlight a dire need to harness the potential of the youth, which can be achieved only if they are infused with the right knowledge and skills. The country needs to work more on the employability skills of its youth to make them job-ready, world-ready, and future-ready, and to create a sustainable skilled labour market. This article is an attempt to examine the concept of employability in the present context, the skills required, the persisting skill gap, and the efforts being made by the Government to bridge this gap.

Employability and Skills

India has witnessed significant employment growth of nearly 36%, adding around 170 million jobs between 2016-17 and 2022-23 (PIB, Govt. of India, Oct. 4, 2024), yet "Jobless Growth" has emerged as a new challenge. The issue of employability has taken a new course because not even graduates are consistently considered worthy of being employed. This raises the

question: what is employability? Does Employability signify a paradigm shift in the roles of employers, employees, and the market? Why is there so much concern over the lack of skills among graduates?

As far as employment is concerned, we all know that it is the expected outcome of education. But in today's perspective, it is not just about getting a job; rather, it refers to "the knowledge, skills, and attitudes graduates have acquired through higher education can demonstrate" (Hillage and Pollard, 1998). Yorke and Knight (2003) summarised employability as "a set of achievements, including skills, understandings, and personal attributes, that offer a better chance for gaining employment". It is multidimensional, revolving around the employer, graduates, and HEIs (Tymon, 2013). Thus, employability is the ability to get a job, remain in that job, and excel in career development. Employability skills are valuable assets that graduates are supposed to possess to secure graduate-level employment. A graduate is expected to possess both hard skills (core knowledge and skills obtained through higher education) and soft skills, which comprise personal attributes (Clarke, 2017).

Recently, soft skills have gained prominence in knowledge-intensive industries. These are non-technical skills (interpersonal or behavioural skills) used to apply technical skills during employment (Williams, 2015). Deming (2017) states that the world has witnessed a paradigm shift in the era of Industrial Revolution 4.0, and employees need to be more flexible and adaptive, with strong interpersonal skills. The interpersonal skills to deal with the challenges of professional life, coupled with the ability to combine cognitive and meta-cognitive skills, have become inevitable in the present context (Succi, 2019). Consequently, soft skills have now become the 21st-century skills (McGunagle, D., and Zizka, 2020).

The Future of Jobs Report, 2020, released by the World Economic Forum, states that by 2025, 85 million jobs may be displaced by a shift in the division of labour between humans and machines, while 97 million new roles may emerge that are more adapted to the new division of labour between humans, machines, and algorithms (p.3). The jobs of the future will rely more on the following fifteen skills:

- Analytical thinking and innovation
- Active learning and learning strategies
- Complex problem-solving
- Critical thinking and analysis
- Creativity, originality and initiative
- Leadership and social influence
- Technology use, monitoring and control
- Technology design and programming
- Resilience, stress tolerance and flexibility
- Reasoning, problem-solving and ideation
- Emotional intelligence
- Troubleshooting and user experience
- Service orientation
- Systems analysis and evaluation
- Persuasion and negotiation (Source- Future of Jobs Survey 2020, World Economic Forum, p.36)

Gainer (1988) had long before outlined the major skills to make youth job-ready. These skills included Individual Competence, Economic Adaptability Skills, Personal Reliability Skills,

and Group and Organisational Effectiveness Skills, with a focus on interpersonal skills, negotiation, creativity, and leadership. Lankard (1987), in the Connections: School and Work Transitions curriculum, called ‘Work Maturity Skills’, identified seven categories of employability skills:

- Present a Positive Image
- Exhibit Positive Work Attitudes
- Practice Good Work Habits
- Practice Ethical Behaviour
- Communicate Effectively
- Accept Responsibility
- Cooperate with Others

Thus, the above discussion shows that skills have always been an important aspect of employment. Even in the present era driven by knowledge, technology, and AI, it is a fact that technology can never fully replace the skills possessed by human resources. Hence, skills, especially soft skills such as interpersonal relationships, work ethics, communication ability, social skills, and team spirit, are an integral aspect of employability.

Youth, Employment and Skill Gaps: What the Data Reveal

The skill gap is a major hindrance to job growth globally. The ILO’s report, ‘World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends, 2024’, prepared by Ekkehard Ernst and his team, states that the worldwide youth unemployment rate (UR) dropped to 13.3% in 2023 from 15.6% in 2021. In India, according to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) conducted by MoSPI, the estimated Unemployment Rate (UR) for individuals aged 15 years and above has steadily declined from 6 per cent in 2017-18 to 3.2 per cent in 2023-24. The proportion of self-employed workers in the workforce has also risen from 52.2 per cent in 2017-18 to 58.4 per cent in 2023-24, which reflects growing entrepreneurial activity. The Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR) has increased from 23.3 per cent in 2017-18 to 41.7 per cent in 2023-24. Schemes such as Mudra Yojana, Skill India, Start-Up India, and Stand-Up India have been significant in fostering entrepreneurship, providing skill training, and supporting individuals in creating self-reliant and sustainable livelihoods (PIB, Govt. of India, Jan.31, 2025).

However, earlier in 2023, 47% of Indian workers, and especially 62% of youth, were reported to be underqualified as per the report, ‘The Global Skill Gaps Measurement and Monitoring Report’ by the ILO, published in 2023 under India’s G20 presidency. This indicates a substantial mismatch between the skills possessed by Indian workers and the demands of the labour market. The report suggests that skill gaps need to be addressed, and youth must be skilled to enter and navigate the fast-evolving labour market. Workforce development initiatives must be improved for the continuous reskilling/upskilling of existing workers to facilitate their labour market transitions. This means that the workforce is not prepared to meet the needs of the market.

Earlier in 2019, a study by Trehan showed that out of 13 million people who join the workforce per year in India, only one-fourth of management professionals, one-fifth of engineers, and one-tenth of other graduates are employable. This accounts for 27.2% of India’s youth—almost 175 million youngsters—who are not in education, employment, or training (Trehan, D, 2019). In this regard, mention must be made of the Mercer Mettl Report, ‘India’s Graduate Skill Index,

2025'. Based on data collected from more than 2,700 campuses covering over one million students, the report presents an analysis of the skill readiness of Indian youth. The major findings of this report are:

- Only 42.6% of Indian Graduates were found to be employable in 2024, and youth lack technical skills.
- Graduates from Tier 1 Colleges demonstrate higher employability in technical and non-technical skills as compared to graduates from Tier 2 and Tier 3 colleges.
- Employability for technical roles increased from 41.3% in 2023 to 42% in 2024, while it dropped for non-technical roles to 43.5% in 2024 from 48.3% in 2023. HR associate roles have the lowest employability at 39.9% among other top non-technical job roles in demand.
- There is a gender disparity in employment, where employability among male students is 43.4% and 41.7% for female students.
- Regional disparity is also visible in the employability status owing to factors such as quality of education, availability of job opportunities, and alignment of skills with industry demands.
- Among Northern States, Delhi ranks highest in employability at 53.4 per cent, followed by Himachal Pradesh and Punjab with 51.1%.
- No southern states are in the top ten list for technical employment.

So, all the above-mentioned reports and studies point towards the evident skill gap or lack of employability skills among youth and graduates. However, the Economic Survey of India, 2023-24, challenges the notion of 'jobless growth'. Initiatives like internships in companies (PM Internship Scheme) and public-private partnerships for skill development and vocational training are the thrust areas where the government has been constantly working. According to PLFS data, the proportion of skilled people from 2018-19 to 2023-24 has increased because of several initiatives taken by the Government.

Key achievements in this direction include (PIB, Govt. of India, Jan.31, 2025):

- Over 1.57 crore persons trained and over 1.21 crore persons certified under various components of Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY).
- Over 1.24 crore persons enrolled under the Craftsmen Training Scheme at Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs).
- Over 27 lakh people have been trained, and over 26 lakh have been certified under Jan Sikshan Sansthan (JSS).
- 11.79 lakh artisans have been imparted basic skill training in 3,145 Skill centres, spanning 559 districts under PM Vishwakarma.
- A total of 37.94 lakh apprentices have been engaged from 2016-17 to 2024-25 (up to 31 October 2024).
- 20 lakh youth to be skilled over five years and 1,000 ITIs to be upgraded under the new ITI upgradation scheme announced in the Union Budget 2024.

So, on one hand, studies indicate a skill gap, skill mismatch, and skill deficit among youth who are not job-ready. On the other hand, there is evidence that the government is establishing a resilient and responsive skilled ecosystem to keep pace with emerging global trends in the job market (Economic Survey 2023-24). The data released by the PIB, Ministry of Labour & Employment on January 31, 2025, indicates that India's employment growth has increased

significantly, and increasing investment in education and skill development programmes presents a progressive picture of the country.

Bridging the Skill Gap: Efforts Made So Far

India is making constant efforts to improve the employment landscape, and several policies and programmes have been initiated for employment generation and the employability of youth. The most significant effort in this direction was the creation of the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (MSDE) on November 10, 2014. It was entrusted with the responsibility of coordinating all Skill Development efforts across the country, bridging the gap between demand and supply of skilled manpower, building the vocational and technical training framework, skill up-gradation, and skill development. It is aided by the Directorate General of Training (DGT), the National Council for Vocational Education and Training (NCVT), the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC), the National Skill Development Fund (NSDF) and 37 Sector Skill Councils (SSCs), as well as 33 National Skill Training Institutes (NSTIs) and about 15,000 Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) (<https://www.msde.gov.in/ministry>).

In 2015, the National Skill Development and Entrepreneurship Policy was formulated, superseding the first National Policy on Skill Development of 2009. Its vision is “to create an ecosystem of empowerment by Skilling on a large Scale at Speed with high Standards to promote a culture of innovation-based entrepreneurship which can generate wealth and employment to ensure Sustainable livelihoods for all citizens in the country” (Section 3.1, p.11). In pursuance of this policy, the Prime Minister of India, Shri Narendra Modi, launched the Skill India Mission in 2015 as a milestone in making the country ‘Aatmanirbhar’ (self-reliant). Several schemes were also introduced; mention must be made of Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) to make youth industry-ready, Jan Shikshan Sansthan (JSS) to provide vocational training to the underprivileged population, and PM YUVA Yojana to create an enabling environment through entrepreneurship education and training (<https://skillindiamission.in/>).

‘SANKALP’ (Skills Acquisition and Knowledge Awareness for Livelihood Promotion), a World Bank-funded programme managed under the MSDE, was launched on January 19, 2018, for short-term skill training, quality assurance of skill development programmes, and the inclusion of marginalised sections in such programmes (<https://sankalp.msde.gov.in/#/web/about/SANKALP>).

The Government has also been working on strengthening the educational system and aligning it with the demands of the market. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasises removing the hard separation between general and vocational education. Section 16.5 of the policy document states that by 2025, at least 50% of learners through the school and higher education system shall have exposure to vocational education, for which a clear action plan with targets and timelines will be developed (p.44). In this regard, the constitution of a National Committee for the Integration of Vocational Education (NCIVE) has been proposed (Section 16.6, p.44). To fulfil the vision of NEP 2020, a National Credit Framework (NCrF) was approved by the government in April 2023. It is a comprehensive credit framework encompassing elementary, school, higher, and vocational education & training.

The National Skills Qualifications Framework (NSQF) was launched in December 2013 and was rationalised and notified in June 2023. The NSQF is a nationally integrated education and

competency-based skill framework that organises qualifications according to a series of ten levels, each representing different levels of knowledge, skills, and aptitude. These levels are defined by descriptors expressed in terms of learning outcomes in five domains: (i) professional theoretical knowledge, (ii) professional and technical skills/expertise, (iii) aptitude, mindset, soft skills, employment readiness & entrepreneurship skills, (iv) broad learning outcomes, and (v) level of responsibility. The purpose is to help youth acquire desired competency levels, transition to the job market, and upgrade their competencies (NSQF, p7). The UGC has also taken several initiatives following NEP 2020, such as Guidelines on a Sustainable and Vibrant University-Industry Linkage System for Indian Universities, and Guidelines for Internship/Research Internship for Undergraduate Students (<https://www.ugc.gov.in/MajorInitiatives>). Thus, several efforts are being made by the Government of India and the governing bodies of HEIs to enhance the employability of youth and make them skilled and ready to face domestic as well as global market forces.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it is clear that the employability of youth is a condition that must be fulfilled if the country wants to reap its rich demographic dividend. The country's young population is an asset for the world as well, because, as per the Observer Research Report, 2023, about 24.3% of the incremental global workforce over the next decade will come from India. Further, according to the "Global Economy: Tenuous Resilience amid Persistent Uncertainty" report released by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in July 2025, India has emerged as the fourth-largest economy, and its economy is expected to grow at 6.5% in 2024 and sustain 6.4% growth in both 2025 and 2026 (p.9). So, the entire world has its eyes set on our country. With a young, skilled workforce, India could easily fulfil its goal of becoming a 'Viksit Bharat'.

There is no doubt that the government has made significant efforts, and as per the data, the proportion of skilled people, as well as the employment rate, has increased over the years. But still, this is not enough. We need to work on a two-fold strategy: first, minimising the gap between market demand and manpower supply, and second, ensuring the constant skilling, upskilling, and reskilling of our youth to make them ready for future market trends. There is a dire need to empower our youth, unlock their capacities, and utilise their contributions towards the economic growth of the nation.

About the Author

Dr. Mukta Mani is a Asst. Professor at the Department of Education, Patna University, Patna (India). Email: muktamani.164@gmail.com

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