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# PERCEIVED DIFFERENCE AMONG THE EMPLOYERS AND GRADUATES OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH REGARDING THE ESSENTIAL EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS

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## ABSTRACT

The study was conducted as a prelude to research on employability skill development among the graduates of Arunachal Pradesh. It focussed on the difference in the perception of both employers as well as graduates concerning the skills essential to employability. Managing Directors of twenty companies mostly linked with manufacturing and financial sectors and 75 candidates who were either employed within a year of their graduation from any of the HEIs in the State or at least attended placement or job interviews responded to a questionnaire that dealt with the perceived importance of essential employability skills. According to the employers, lack of apt skills continues to be the major hurdle to employing graduates. Compared to employers, skills regarded as most important by graduates are communication, integrity and interpersonal skills, self-management skills, and teamwork. Whereas, those the employers consider essential are technical skills interpersonal skills integrity, self-management skills, and teamwork. However, personal integrity, interpersonal skills, self-management skills, and teamwork find a place among the top-ranked six skills according to both groups of respondents, which indicates that employers and graduates ascribe similar importance to individual attributes.

**Keywords:** Employability, employability skills, employers, graduates, skill enhancement.

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## Introduction

The extensively discussed concept of employability has garnered amplified attention over the last few decades and yet remains vague, unexplored, or rather under-explored. The consequent result of many serious researches on this concept has witnessed the advent of a bunch of definitions with none of them in a position to embrace all the nuances the term entails. Besides, employment and employability skills as complementary phenomena make any research on the term more complex. The persistent challenge is to identify those integral components that provide an exhaustive notion of employability.

Employability in general refers to certain attributes which enable an individual to acquire a job. In one of the earliest works on employability skills, (Hillage, 1998), stated: *“In simple terms, employability is about being capable of getting and keeping fulfilling work. More comprehensively employability is the capability to move self-sufficiently within the labor market to realize potential through sustainable employment”*. Similarly, in the opinion of (Bhaerman, 1988), being employed is equivalent to retaining a job. For any person with very little of adequate preparation, a job is most likely to be a provisional condition. However, being employable amounts to possessing those qualities required to preserve a job and progress in it.

Graduates form a major part of the talent pool available to a state or nation. Skills or related attributes provide the base for graduate employability. A brilliant academic record may not compensate for the lack of workplace skills as employers are highly concerned with recruiting the most suitable candidate with an accurate blend of multi-dimensional skills rather than one with brilliant academic excellence yet poor employability skills. To be competitive, the contender is expected to demonstrate to employers the necessary technical skills, as well as the broader array of employability skills that provide the link between academic performance and graduate employment.

The article (Artess, 2017) examined here provides multiple facets or perspectives on employability. Great effort has been invested in identifying and developing a list of competencies, skills, and attributes graduates are expected to imbibe. Those identified components transcend beyond mere subject knowledge and qualifications to personal characteristics and behavioural patterns and competencies possessed by students. Acquisition of these skills, more than preparing for a job provides a transformation of identity to students as employees.

In the words of (Bhambri, 2020) employability skills are a set of skills that can be regarded as valuable to all employment sectors than any particular career. These workplace skills can be beneficial to both employers as well as employees as they embrace a multitude of job opportunities and flexibility in job patterns. The skills and values thus identified for success in job include skills for effective communication, teamwork, proper administration, capacity for critical thinking, time management and the strength of ethical values.

(Gibb, 2004) in his study classified several complementary employability skills and listed them as, (a) basic/fundamental skills (this category included subject knowledge, numerical skills and technological know-how), (b) people-related skills (effective communication ability, strong interpersonal and team-work skills are placed under this group), (c) conceptual or thinking skills (this set is concerned with information retrieval and organization, innovation and creativity, problem-solving and willingness to learn), (d) personal skills and attributes (this category considers flexibility, accountability, personal management, self-esteem and resourcefulness), (e) business skills (this set comprised innovation and enterprise skills, and finally (f) community skills ( focuses primarily on such as civic sense).

(Mathew, 2004) in an article asserted that employability skills such as communication, presentation, team building, leadership skill, time management, interview, and interpersonal skills mould students' careers

by helping them to be job-ready. In the opinion of (Paadi, 2014) the competence anticipated in a graduate includes teamwork, effective communication, analytic power, critical thinking, and computer skills. (Liyanage, 2016) cited graduates' practical knowledge, analytical ability, self-management, optimistic attitude, commitment to work, communicative and IT skills as essential to fetching a job.

In the keynote address on 'diversity and difference' at Wolverhampton University, (Harvey, 2002) presented the *Magic Bullet Model* which emphasized a holistic approach to the enhancement of employability skills that can be integrated into the curriculum. He stressed upon "generic skills" that employers are searching for among individuals while performing the hiring process. These would include good communication, motivation and initiative, leadership, reliability, teamwork, patience, and the like. He opined that employability has several definitions but they break down into two broad groups. The first relates to the ability of the student to obtain, retain, and develop in a job after graduation. The other is concerned with enhancing the students' attributes (skills, knowledge, attitudes, and abilities) and eventually empowering them to be life-long learners.

(Yorke, 2004) separated the various dimensions of employability and grouped them into:

- (i) *Personal qualities* (this set of skills focuses principally on self-awareness, sense of individual freedom, emotional maturity, ability to adapt to new environments, stress management, initiative, openness to novel ideas, and thoughtfulness).
- (ii) *Core skills*: (this set of skills is concerned with effective, numerical efficiency, linguistic skills, oral and written communication, critical ability, presentation skills, and universal perspective).
- (iii) *Process skills*: (skills under this category include moral and ethical sense, computer knowledge, cross-cultural adaptability, civil and political knowledge, ability to handle problems, prioritization, constructive criticism, negotiation skills and decision making).

These skills have been further highlighted in his employability model which is referred to as the USEM model. The said model elucidates four didactic methods of employability enhancement; *understanding, skills, efficacy beliefs, and meta-cognition*. This approach highlights a personal dimension of employability and states that employability benefits not only the individual but society and the economy as a whole.

USEM model, though well esteemed, appears to have ignored the requirements of novices who are rather oblivious to the notion of employability and its relevance. This drawback has been overcome through a different model termed DOTS, proposed by, (Law, 2003). This approach assigns weightage to decision-making skills, job-opportunity alertness, and Transition learning. The advantage of the suggested approach lies in the fact that it provides applicants with the chance to explore themselves and career openings in keeping with their capabilities.

Later, (Dacre, 2007), proposed the Employability Skill Model also known as the Career EDGE model which is aimed at *Career* development achieved through life *Experience, Degree, Generic skills, and Emotional Intelligence*. The benefit of this model was that it could be adopted not only by fresh graduates rather also by those interested in shifting to other careers later on.

(Robles, 2012) would term employability skills as fundamental skills or soft skills or basic skills and behavioral patterns that are inevitable to any type of job. He identifies personal integrity, effective communication, politeness, accountability, community skills, optimistic attitude, expertise, suppleness, collaborative teamwork, and work ethic as essential to employability, particularly for graduates. Soft competence is a term most often employers use to indicate intangible and non-technical skills that graduates pursue.

## **Graduate Employability**

In recent times, authors have emphasized a more intricate understanding of graduate employability and anticipated numerous interconnected traits, skills, and proficiencies that enable individuals to secure and accomplish much in employment. (Rowe, 2017) contented that employability explicitly and predominantly points to those attributes and skills required to be possessed by graduates if they are to ensure employment. (Singh, 2015) acknowledges the growing pressure the various governments and job markets exert on institutes of advanced learning to prepare graduates with job-specific skills. The authors stress the significance of collaborative training in instilling generic and specific skills in to graduates at university level. Skills that are expected to be imparted or inculcated are the so-called basic skills which can embrace personal as well as people skills, social as well as business skills, and critical or conceptual abilities. Enhancement of these skills is likely to assist graduates become confident enough to mingle freely in the society in order to deepen their knowledge and gather up-to-date information, adapt to the requirements of the workplace, and remain ever competitive in the constantly changing market milieu.

A study (Ganeshan, 2016) highlights problem-solving, leadership, literary and numerical, communication, listening, computer, and organizational skills as employability boosters for graduates. To offer a comprehensive model vital to graduate employability (Clarke, 2018) proposes certain robust components that are inevitable to such a process. They include: “human capital which deals with personal competencies and work experience; social capital which concerns social status and university position; individual behaviors which focus more on self-management and career-building skills; individual attributes which, as the term itself indicates, emphasizes personality variables; labor market which has no independent existence devoid of supply and demand factors; and perceived employability. The proposed model was meant to assist graduates in identifying various areas of their responsibility as well as to specify areas of collaboration with employers, industry, and HEIs.

A study by (Blasko, 2002) conducted among the graduates belonging to seven different nations, drew up five key skills they thought were inevitable for employment. Skills under deliberation included the oft-repeated skills of effective communication, teamwork, and problem-solving as also computer skills, reflective thinking, and self-appraisal skills.

A study (Elisabeth, 2019) conducted among graduates across five European countries to identify a set of skills considered important for employability, the author arrived at communication, critical thinking, and interpersonal skills as the most important. Other skills under consideration included technical skills, entrepreneurial skills, and personal attributes. (Lawden, 2011) makes a minor categorization of

competencies that are imparted during a graduate's program of study and a series of soft skills like communication, teamwork, critical thinking, problem-solving, and leadership apart from managerial abilities. For the author, all of these are prerequisites for a secure job.

Importantly, as we have seen, graduate employability is multi-dimensional and is not constrained by academic performance alone but accepts into the orbit career management skills, labour-market knowledge, on-the-job learning and a range of associated values and attributes. The various perspectives of employability or allied features referred to thus far are never an exhaustive list of all the essential skills that can ensure a job for any graduate. They are, in fact, just a few of those skills that educational institutes, training centres, and employers are concerned with while preparing job-ready candidates for the future.

### **A Compendium of Graduate attributes from the Literature review**

From the literature reviewed thus far, it seems apt to list out the most highlighted as well as highly valued global competencies inevitable to employability. In this attempt, the researcher is well aware that it is explicitly difficult to determine a list of universal skill sets and attributes related to graduate employability. However, given the fact that such skills and competencies are in existence the employability of the graduates largely depends on how much they benefit from the strategies available to them to navigate the problems they encounter in the highly competitive labor market.

Communication skills, job-specific technical skills, career management, leadership, creativity, subject knowledge, critical evaluative skills, customer knowledge, emotional aptitude, entrepreneurial skills, ethical skills, adaptability skills, independent thinking, personal initiative, relationship skills, linguistic skills, multi-tasking ability, numeral skills, job opportunity knowledge, optimism, presentation skills, problem-solving, Professionalism, Research and exploratory skills, Suppleness, Self-management skills, Team building, Time management skills, Writing skills, Self- motivation, high integrity, reliability.

The above list includes a range of skills, attitudes, attributes, competencies, behaviours, and values the significance and relevance of which cannot be limited to merely employability because these permeate every aspect of one's life. However, for the current study, a few of these are articulated and categorized into skill sets or attributes which in the opinion of the employers, academicians, and graduates are inevitable to graduate employability.

### **Study Objective**

To achieve the purpose of the study, the researcher has figured out the following objectives from an exhaustive literature review.

1. To analyze various employability skills in general and to identify a set of key competencies inevitable to graduate employability.
2. To examine how the graduates in the state of Arunachal Pradesh rank their perceived employability skill competency.
3. To examine how employers rank their expected employability skills in graduates?
4. To arrive at the perceived difference among the employers and graduates of Arunachal Pradesh regarding essential employability skills.

## Research Sample

The survey involved 100 graduates from the various HEIs of Arunachal Pradesh and 20 employers from Northeastern states. Data were collected between October and November 2023. The Employers' questionnaires that were returned duly filled were handled directly by CEOs or HR Managers. All these companies under consideration were confined to domestic operations and employed from 50 up to 200 employees. Companies employing more than 200 accounted for 20%. All these companies have been recruiting graduates for more than over the last 7 years. To the query whether the company offered job positions to fresh graduates 16 employers responded positively and to the question if they had a sufficient number of job seekers for the various positions on offer, 65% of them were positive.

The sample of students is composed of graduates from the various HEIs in the state of Arunachal Pradesh. Of the 100 candidates from various learning streams who were administered the questionnaire 75 of them responded with completed questionnaires, accounting for 75% of all the graduates in the sample group. All the respondents were either participants in a recruitment process or those already employed within a year of their graduation. To consider the gender perspective, 34 (45.3%) males and 41 (54.6%) females participated in the survey.

## Methodology

The preliminary part of the current study focussed on a systematic review of literature that addressed and analysed various attributes and skills relevant to employability in particular to that of graduates. From the literature thus reviewed the researcher drew up a compendium of all the major skills and competencies that contributed to graduate employability. Of these significantly relevant skills were identified to be included in the questionnaire. These were selected from various employability skill frameworks already considered during the literature review. Certain skills though named differently, had similar descriptions in the frameworks under study and therefore, those skills were given the most appropriate as well as a concise name. Finally, the section drew up 21 skills, inspired and developed from the literature review, to be rated according to the level of importance by the graduates and employers on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (not important) to 5 (very important). The Questionnaire was validated by experts in the field such as professors of Management institutions, heads of business undertakings as well as experts involved in skill development programs.

The final list consisted of the following skills and attributes. Communication skills, Interpersonal skills, Self-management skills, Critical thinking, Personal attributes, Resource-management skills, technical competence, Analytical skills, Leadership skills, Teamwork, Digital literacy, Workplace ethics, Adaptability, Willingness to learn, Networking, Problem-solving, Decision making, Subject knowledge, Market awareness, Personal integrity.

This paper scrutinizes the perception of graduates and employers about those skills and qualities that reinforce graduate employability. Data were collected through a questionnaire. Both groups were requested to rate each of the employability skills according to its relative importance. The Employer's Expectation Questionnaire (EEQ) focussed on the numerous skills and qualities for employability and sought a response



from the employers to identify to what extent the abilities graduates have acquired matched their expectations. The Graduate Employability Skill Questionnaire (GESQ) sought to measure the extent to which various employability skills or attributes helped graduates acquire a job or to rate the skills as per their inevitability in job acquisition. Data derived from the two groups were then equated to determine diversity in perceptions.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The major concern of the study was to examine the correspondence of the importance of employability characteristics from the employers' perspective as well as that of the graduates.

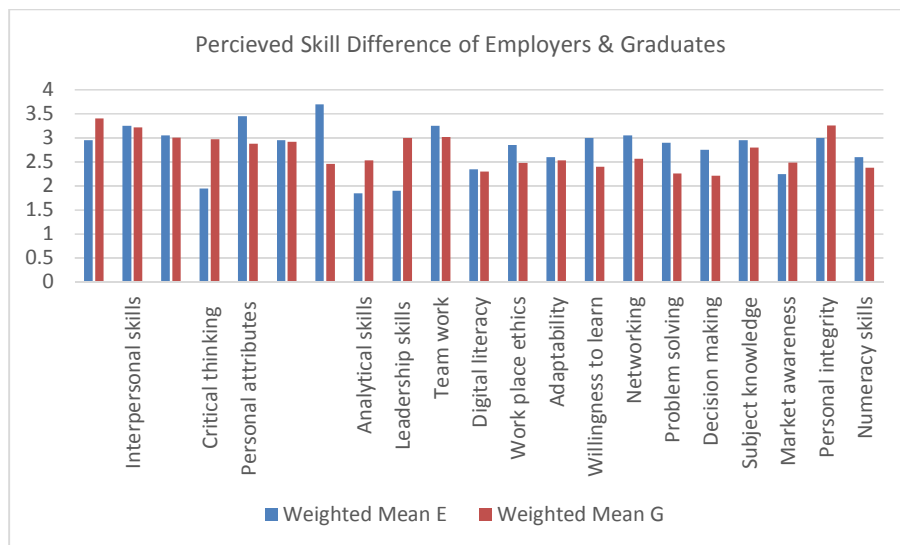
*Table 1: Assessment of Importance given by Employers and Graduates regarding essential employability skills*

<b>EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS</b>	<b>Graduate Weighted Mean</b>	<b>Employers Weighted Mean</b>	<b>Graduates' Rank</b>	<b>Employer's Rank</b>
Communication skills	3.41	2.95	1	6
Interpersonal skills	3.22	3.25	3	3
Self-management skills	3.01	3.05	5	4
Critical thinking	2.97	1.95	7	12
Personal attributes	2.88	3.45	9	2
Resource-management skills	2.92	2.95	8	6
Technical competence	2.46	3.7	16	1
Analytical skills	2.53	1.85	12	15
Leadership skills	3	1.9	6	13
Team work	3.02	3.25	4	3
Digital literacy	2.30	2.35	17	10
Work place ethics	2.48	2.85	14	8
Adaptability	2.53	2.6	12	9
Willingness to learn	2.4	3	15	5
Networking	2.57	3.05	11	4
Problem solving	2.26	2.9	18	7
Decision making	2.21	2.75	19	9
Subject knowledge	2.8	2.95	10	6
Market awareness	2.49	2.25	13	11
Personal integrity	3.26	3	2	5
Numeracy skills	2.38	2.6	16	9

The table displays an evident statistical significance in the way both the stakeholders view employability skills. As established in Table 1, the important scores for employability characteristics vary significantly particularly when it comes to their first choice. It is worth noticing that characteristics with significant differences include technical competence, problem-solving, willingness to learn, and decision-making. The largest differences in average importance are detected for technical skills which employers place at the top whereas the graduates assign on the 16<sup>th</sup> place to it as they assign primacy to communication skills.

Compared to employers, the skills regarded as most important by graduates are communication, integrity and interpersonal skills, self-management skills, and teamwork. Whereas, those the employers consider essential are technical skills interpersonal skills integrity, self-management skills, and teamwork. However, personal integrity, interpersonal skills, self-management skills, and teamwork find a place among the top-ranked five skills according to both groups of respondents, which implies that by and large, employers and graduates place parallel importance on individual employability characteristics. Compared to students, employers deemed technical skills to be a more important skill, being also the most important of all the skills. When employers value analytical skills as least important, graduates assign the least importance to decision-making skills, placing communication at the top to which employers grant only the sixth position.

**Figure-1 Assessment of Importance given by Employers and Graduates regarding essential employability skills**



A significant difference is noticed when it comes to skills like decision-making, problem-solving networking, digital literacy, willingness to learn, and leadership skills. Scores assigned to these indicate that both groups of respondents do have specific views on the skills essential to employability. The results of the preliminary studies indicated a significant difference in the graduate perception of skills required for employability in comparison with the employer's expectation of the same. The resultant skill gap needs to be rectified. A few suggestions that might help reduce this mismatch are mentioned here.

1. HEIs need to establish a closer relationship between employers and industries. Employers can thus intimate the requirements and expectations concerning the skills necessary for the job.



2. Graduates need to enhance familiarity with the ever-evolving market trends. Input from employers, professionals, and business experts can help them to be aware of the market environment.
3. Another way to minimize the apparent skill gap between candidates and employers is to integrate obligatory internships into the curriculum so that the graduates get the opportunity to associate closely with the labor market and employers. This can lead to market awareness and motivate the acquisition of skills.
4. Opportunities must be provided to graduates to identify and enhance their attributes or potential. HEIs should propose and implement strategies for the same.
5. It is recommended that further research on similar topics could base itself on data from employed graduates as their perception would be more realistic and based on experience.

## Conclusion

Every job-oriented learning and training is concerned with honing the skills of the workforce to fit into the job market. Unless and until the HEIs and training centres wholly understand the requirements of the constantly changing job market scenario, it would be rather difficult for them to provide a skilled and job-ready workforce. The gap that exists in the perception of employability skills among employers and graduates is indicative of the lack of interaction and connectivity that exists between these two categories. When weighing what skills, the institution should equip the graduates with, it should take into consideration the requirements of the employers as well as the unpredictable job market.

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