

## Integrating Practical Skills in Higher Education: Challenges and Solutions

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### *Abstract*

*In the contemporary global and digital landscape, the objective of higher education is no longer confined to imparting theoretical knowledge alone; it is directly intertwined with a student's employability and practical skills. This research chapter presents a critical and pragmatic analysis of the widening gap between academic degrees and actual competence within the Indian higher education system. The primary objective of this study is to identify the fundamental challenges that impede the path of skill development at the college level. The study reveals that routine issues such as the 'rote learning culture' fostered by the traditional examination system, unavailability of resources, excessive administrative burden on teachers, and a lack of synergy between industry and academia are rendering students practically unequipped. To address these challenges, this chapter proposes highly practical and low-cost solutions that standard educational institutions can easily incorporate into their daily routines. Prominent among these are restructuring the evaluation system (emphasizing projects and presentations), organizing regular sessions for soft skills, establishing local-connect initiatives with regional industries and organizations, and involving alumni as active mentors. In conclusion, this chapter emphasizes that the core objectives of the National Education Policy (NEP 2020) can only be realized when we transition knowledge from textbooks into the tangible skills and behaviour of students. This study will serve as a practical guide for policymakers, faculty members, and institutional administrators alike.*

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### **1. Introduction: The Sheen of Degrees vs. The Sound of Skills**

In today's rapidly changing global and digital landscape, education is no longer merely a medium for acquiring knowledge; rather, it has become the bedrock of an individual's holistic development and self-reliance. Currently, a profound and deeply concerning contradiction exists within Indian society and its academic corridors regarding the true purpose of education. Every year, millions of young graduates emerge from thousands of universities and colleges across the nation, adorned in ceremonial gowns and holding folders stacked with degrees during convocation ceremonies. In the eyes of their parents lies the dream of a secure future, and in the estimation of society, these youths have successfully entered the ranks of the 'highly educated.' However, the harsh reality of this picturesque view hits hard the moment these very individual's step into the actual job market. Despite possessing first-class marks or distinctions on their transcripts, their confidence shatters when they are asked to perform basic professional tasks such as drafting a simple, practical job application, outlining a team project, or articulately presenting an idea before a small audience. This is precisely where the most critical and systemic crisis of our current higher education system comes to light: the ever-widening chasm between an academic degree and actual competence. Historically, our educational framework has operated for decades under the archaic assumption that if a student memorizes textbooks thoroughly, performs exceptionally well in examinations, and secures an academic credential, they are fully equipped to navigate the challenges of both life and employment. This assembly-line model might have been relevant during the Industrial Revolution, an era that demanded a workforce tailored for clerical and predictable, routine tasks. However, the twenty-first century—driven by information technology, Artificial Intelligence (AI), and rapid economic disruptions—flatly rejects this obsolete approach. Today, the primary inquiry from employers is not, "Which theories did you study in your curriculum, and what was your final percentage?" Instead, their direct and pragmatic question is, "What can you practically do to resolve the real-world challenges facing our organization?"

Skill development is often viewed through a narrow lens, mistakenly perceived as a domain confined strictly to technical institutes,

vocational training centers, or Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs). This is a highly misleading notion. Practical skills are a foundational necessity for any student pursuing higher education, whether they belong to history, literature, commerce, or the sciences. In the context of higher education, practical skills simply translate to the art of articulating one's thoughts effectively (Communication Skills), finding logical and independent solutions to complex issues (Critical Thinking & Problem Solving), collaborating effectively within a group (Teamwork), and swiftly adapting to evolving environments (Adaptability). The greatest irony in this scenario is that despite having a progressive policy framework like the National Education Policy (NEP 2020), our day-to-day classrooms remain entangled in the web of a deep-rooted 'rote learning culture.' A student's entire focus remains anchored on cramming answers to fill pages in an answer booklet during the final three hours of a semester exam. There is an absolute disconnect regarding how the knowledge being acquired can be utilized in real life or for societal benefit. Consequently, while we continue to multiply the number of degrees awarded, we are lagging behind in providing the nation with a skilled, self-reliant, and globally competitive workforce. Therefore, it has become imperative to critically analyse the real-world challenges hindering the integration of practical skills in higher education and to devise actionable, low-cost solutions that can actually be implemented in ordinary college classrooms, moving beyond mere paperwork and lofty claims.

## **2. Importance of Practical Skills in Higher Education**

To understand why integrating practical skills into higher education is an urgent necessity rather than a luxury, one must look beyond the traditional definitions of literacy. For generation after generation, a university degree was viewed as an automatic passport to social mobility and financial security. However, in the contemporary socio-economic framework, the mere acquisition of knowledge has been decentralized. Information is now ubiquitous; a student can access complex academic theories, historical facts, and scientific data at the click of a button. Consequently, the value of an individual in the modern workforce is no longer judged by *what they know*, but by *what they can execute* with that knowledge. Practical skills act as the bridge that converts passive academic information into active social and economic utility. First and foremost, the inclusion of practical skills is directly linked to the survival of graduates

in an unpredictable employment market. When a student transitions from the controlled environment of a classroom to the chaotic dynamics of the professional world, they encounter problems that do not have standardized, multiple-choice answers. Whether it is managing a classroom, handling institutional data, or coordinating a community welfare project, theoretical excellence falls short without core operational skills. For instance, a student with a brilliant degree in literature or social sciences must know how to construct a coherent project report, analyse local demographics, or handle basic digital tools to contribute meaningfully to an organization. Therefore, practical training infuses technical competency with behavioural readiness, transforming a raw graduate into an adaptable professional.

Beyond immediate employment, practical skills are fundamental to fostering a culture of critical thinking and intellectual independence. When higher education prioritizes application-oriented learning—such as field surveys, case studies, and interactive presentations—it forces students to step out of their comfort zones. This active engagement breaks the monotony of passive listening. It trains the human mind to question assumptions, evaluate evidence objectively, and communicate solutions with clarity and empathy. These attributes, often clubbed under the umbrella of ‘soft skills’ or ‘life skills,’ are actually the core pillars of human cognitive development. A student trained in this manner does not just look for a job; they develop the entrepreneurial mindset required to create opportunities for themselves and others. Furthermore, the emphasis on practical skills holds immense national and systemic significance, especially in the context of developing economies like India. The aspirational goals set by the National Education Policy (NEP 2020) regarding a self-reliant nation (*Atmanirbhar Bharat*) cannot be realized through textbook memorization alone. To minimize the massive underemployment of educated youths, our colleges must become hubs where the hands are trained alongside the mind. When practical capability becomes the hallmark of higher education, it directly enhances the nation’s human capital index, fuelling innovation at the grassroots level. Ultimately, the importance of practical skills lies in humanizing education—ensuring that the time, effort, and resources spent by a student in a university yield a dignified, self-assured, and capable individual ready to face the world.

### **3. Major Challenges in the Path of Skill Development**

While the theoretical consensus on the necessity of skill-driven

higher education is unassailable, its practical implementation across standard college campuses faces deep-seated structural and cultural resistance. Moving beyond superficial policy declarations requires an honest appraisal of the ground realities that define the daily lives of students and educators alike. A critical examination of the current academic ecosystem reveals a chain of interconnected institutional bottlenecks that turn potential skill-building classrooms into passive centers of rote memory. This problematic cycle begins at the very top with an outdated, memory-centric evaluation framework that continues to dominate the university lifecycle. Despite widespread rhetorical opposition to mechanical memorization, the structural mechanics of standard semester examinations consistently reward reproduction over actual comprehension. A typical student's academic standing is determined almost exclusively by a series of three-hour written assessments conducted at the end of the term, where success is measured by the capacity to memorize extensive passages of text and replicate them across dozens of blank pages. For instance, a student pursuing an undergraduate degree in political science or literature might effortlessly memorize the historical tenets of public policy or the grammatical rules of institutional editing to secure a top grade. However, because the assessment completely ignores the application of these concepts, that same student often struggles to write an error-free professional letter, compile a basic project report, or conduct a ground-level community survey. When the institutional incentive structure heavily favors memorization, students rationally choose to invest their limited energy in passing exams rather than acquiring functional capabilities.

This culture of rote learning is further aggravated by the severe deficit of functional, modern infrastructure within ordinary regional higher education institutions. Developing practical competence cannot happen in a vacuum; it requires regular, unhindered access to contemporary tools, technology, and simulated learning environments. Unfortunately, the reality of a standard regional college is often characterized by outdated computer laboratories with erratic internet connectivity and science labs that function more like historical museums than centers of modern experimentation. In many instances, practical classes in science streams are reduced to a ritualistic exercise of completing "practical files," where students simply copy predefined steps and expected outcomes from an old manual without

ever understanding the real-world troubleshooting involved in a live experiment. When we pivot to general streams like commerce or arts, the infrastructure for soft skills or digital literacy becomes virtually non-existent. A college without a functional language laboratory, a public speaking platform, or basic data-analysis software cannot realistically expect its graduates to develop competitive marketplace skills. This infrastructural vacuum is coupled with a frequently overlooked bottleneck in the academic ecosystem, which is the changing and increasingly burdened role of the college educator. In an ideal educational framework, a professor functions as a mentor, a research guide, and a facilitator of innovative learning experiences. In reality, the daily routine of a higher education faculty member in an ordinary college is heavily weighed down by non-academic, clerical, and administrative responsibilities. From managing chaotic admission lines and verifying complex scholarship documentation to executing meticulous election duties and handling manual attendance registers, a substantial portion of an educator's institutional time is spent away from active pedagogy. Designing application-oriented assignments, organizing interactive group discussions, and providing personalized, constructive feedback on student presentations demand significant preparation and mental bandwidth. When teachers are structurally overwhelmed by administrative paperwork, they are forced to default to passive, lecture-heavy teaching methods that cover the syllabus but fail to cultivate critical skills among students.

Consequently, this administrative and pedagogical stagnation feeds into a broader, systemic isolation between the curriculum taught inside university classrooms and the operational realities of the contemporary professional landscape. Higher education syllabi are notoriously slow to evolve, often remaining unchanged for years due to rigid, multi-layered bureaucratic approval processes. As a result, students are routinely trained in concepts and methodologies that the market has long discarded. Furthermore, standard regional colleges operate with zero structural connection to local industries, businesses, or public institutions. There is a flawed institutional assumption that “internships” and “industry exposure” are exclusive privileges reserved for elite engineering or management institutes. A standard arts or commerce college rarely establishes a memorandum of understanding with local schools, banks, non-

governmental organizations, or small-scale industries. This complete absence of an institutional bridge means that graduates step into the job market with absolutely no exposure to professional hierarchies, workplace ethics, digital collaboration tools, or real-world problem-solving dynamics, leaving them structurally unequipped despite holding a valid degree.

#### **4. Actionable and Low-Cost Solutions for Skill Integration**

To counter these deeply entrenched institutional bottlenecks, higher education must pivot toward solutions that are realistic, sustainable, and independent of massive financial investments. Addressing these challenges does not require an immediate, multi-million-dollar overhaul of university budgets; instead, it demands a strategic restructuring of the daily academic routine and a shift in institutional priorities. The most critical starting point for this transformation lies within the classroom evaluation framework. As long as students are assessed purely on their capacity to reproduce memorized data, their approach to learning will remain passive. Therefore, universities must systematically alter the weightage of semester grades by shifting a significant portion of the assessment toward continuous, application-based metrics. This means that a notable percentage of a student's final score should depend entirely on independent project work, case study documentation, and collaborative assignments. When academic rewards are directly tied to active engagement rather than passive memorization, students will naturally reorient their focus toward developing functional capabilities, effectively dismantling the deeply rooted culture of rote learning from within the system.

In tandem with restructuring evaluation, institutions can easily democratize the acquisition of essential workplace attributes, such as articulate communication, critical reasoning, and team dynamics. Cultivating these core competencies does not require specialized external agencies or expensive certification courses. Colleges can simply optimize their existing schedules by dedicating a specific hours-based slot every week exclusively for interactive peer learning. This designated time can transform ordinary classrooms into collaborative spaces where students are pushed out of their comfort zones to engage in spontaneous debates, structure peer reviews, and practice professional presentations. Such regular, structured exercises gradually build emotional intelligence, eliminate stage anxiety, and instill the confidence required to articulate

thoughts clearly in professional settings. This simple pedagogical intervention ensures that behavioural readiness becomes an inclusive part of a student's graduate journey rather than a privilege restricted to those who can afford external training. Furthermore, higher education must break its systemic isolation by building organic institutional linkages with the immediate regional ecosystem. The conventional assumption that professional exposure is only possible through high-profile corporate attachments severely restricts the growth of students in regional areas. To bridge this gap, colleges must initiate a 'local-connect' framework by establishing institutional relationships with neighboring entities such as regional secondary schools, local administrative bodies, non-governmental organizations, and small-scale commercial enterprises. Integrating mandatory, short-term field projects or observational stays within these local institutions as part of the core curriculum will provide students with invaluable insights into professional hierarchies, operational accountability, and collective problem-solving. This localized approach demystifies the working world and provides invaluable practical exposure without placing any financial strain on the students or the institution.

Finally, this internal restructuring can be immensely strengthened by unlocking the unutilized potential of the institution's own alumni network. A college's former students, who are currently navigating various professional spheres, represent a highly relatable and accessible repository of practical knowledge. By establishing a structured, recurring mentorship network, colleges can bring these professionals back to the campus to interact directly with current batches. These interactions provide students with unfiltered, real-world perspectives on changing workplace dynamics, evolving technical requirements, and the true expectations of employers. It also helps educators stay informed about industry realities, allowing them to subtly update their teaching methodologies despite a rigid, slow-moving centralized syllabus. By transforming alumni into active instructional stakeholders, colleges can build a sustainable, self-renewing bridge between academic learning and professional execution, ensuring that graduates are structurally prepared for the future.

## **5. Conclusion**

Ultimately, the structural evolution of higher education cannot be measured by the sheer volume of degrees awarded annually, but by the

tangible socio-economic utility and self-assurance of its graduates. A university degree loses its foundational purpose when the individual holding it remains incapable of navigating the basic communicative, analytical, and digital demands of the contemporary workspace. The critical exploration of the current academic landscape reveals that the crisis of underemployment is not merely a byproduct of macroeconomic fluctuations; rather, it is deeply rooted in our day-to-day pedagogical practices that prioritize passive memorization over active application. The progressive vision outlined in the National Education Policy (NEP 2020) provides an excellent macro-level direction, but its systemic success relies entirely on micro-level execution within ordinary, regional college classrooms.

As argued throughout this chapter, transitioning from a memory-centric to a skill-driven educational ecosystem does not depend on monumental financial grants or overnight infrastructural overhauls. It requires an immediate, conscious shift in institutional mindset and daily routines. By restructuring internal evaluation systems to reward independent thinking, institutionalizing cost-free peer learning spaces, building organic connections with the local regional economy, and unlocking the professional mentorship of the alumni network, standard colleges can easily democratize skill development. These small, practical interventions hold the power to humanize higher education, ensuring that learning transitions from the static pages of text manuals into the active behaviour and capabilities of the youth. In an era driven by rapid technological disruptions, higher education must quickly shed its archaic assembly-line approach. The time has come to ensure that our academic institutions stop functioning as mere printing presses for degrees and instead transform into vibrant launchpads for skilled, resilient, and self-reliant human capital capable of leading the nation forward.

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