

Synergy of Vocational Skills and Soft Skills in Shaping Employability

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Abstract

Proficiency in technical skills is essential for employment in the world being shaped by fifth industrial revolution, yet the cultivation of complementary soft skills remains crucial for career success. National Education Policy (2020) envisions education that prepares students for meaningful and satisfying lives; education that enables personal accomplishment and enlightenment, constructive public engagement, and productive contribution to the society. The Education Department of Chandigarh Administration has been offering Skills Courses under four broad categories viz., Home Science, Health and Paramedical, Engineering, and Commerce with the aim to enhance employability. The present research paper explores the intricate relationship between vocational skills and soft skills within the context of Vocational Education by seeking and analyzing perceptions of teachers and students. Qualitative methodologies being employed for this study presents the prevailing scenario of soft skills development among students enrolled in such Skill Courses. The research examines the extent to which vocational programs equip students with essential soft skills and the evaluation of the role played by teachers. The study findings are envisaged to lead to a comprehensive understanding of the difficulties and opportunities in including soft skills into vocational education so as to inform policy-makers, educators, and industry stakeholders in creating effective courses that prepare school graduates not only for the demands of the emerging workplace but also to lead satisfying lives.

Keywords: Vocational Education, Skills Courses, Emerging Workplace

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Introduction

Employability requires a seamless blend of technical and soft skills. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 envisions a holistic redesign of the education system to meet the nation's expanding developmental needs, emphasizing the integration of vocational education into all secondary schools over the next decade. The policy aims to decrease the silos between vocational and academic streams by promoting interdisciplinary and inclusive learning. In spite of these aspirations, in India, vocational education faces significant challenges: only 5.6% of students are enrolled in such programs, with college-level participation limited to 16.2%. Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2023 states that the majority of youth join short-term courses lasting six months or less. It significantly restricts opportunities for skill development.

Currently, in Chandigarh, skill courses are functional in 23 government schools, yet systemic challenges persist. As per the Project Approval Board (PAB), Ministry of Education, Government of India (2024), around 11.9% of students drop out following secondary school. Subsequently they are likely to become unskilled workers. This stark reality highlights the crucial role technical and vocational education and training (TVET) must play in improving employability and quality of life. As Stefania Giannini, UNESCO Assistant Director-General for Education, aptly stated, "Through TVET we can equip the youth with the skills and knowledge they need not only to excel in today's job markets, but also to thrive in a rapidly changing world" (World Bank Group, 2023). Though, there are no pendency approvals for the establishment of vocational education labs in Chandigarh government schools under the Samagra Shiksha Scheme, according to the Project Approval Board (PAB), Ministry of Education, Government of India (2024), however private sector involvement in vocational education remains absent (UDISE+ 2021-22). This missing link in scalability and innovation fails despite government schools in Chandigarh have an enrolment of 6,898 students.

Various studies signify the importance of soft skills in career success (Al Mamun, 2012; Oviawe, 2020). The paper explores how the synergy of vocational education and soft skills training, can bridge employability gaps by equipping the students for achievement in highly competitive job market.

Findings

Understanding Students' Perceptions of Soft Skills

Awareness Gap in Understanding Soft Skills. Primarily all the students has shown a lack of awareness with the term "soft skills." This awareness gap hinders their ability to understand the importance of these skills in employability.

Soft skills kya hoti hain? Maine kabhi nahi suna.

(What are soft skills? I have never heard of them.) – Student 1

Communication skills ka toh pata hai, lekin soft skills ke baare mein nahi.

(I know about communication skills, but not soft skills.) – Student 2

These excerpts are suggestive of the fact the soft skills are not introduced to the students. As a result, they remain aloof to its significance in enhancing employability and succeeding in

working spaces. Soft skills are critical for career success (Al Mamun, 2012), but the lack of understanding questions students' readiness for the workplace.

Misconceived Opinion of Communication Skills. Many students demonstrated awareness of communication skills as something that is needed for success in learning and working spaces. However, their understanding is limited to basic conversational abilities or fluency in a particular language specifically English.

In today's time, communication skills are as important as a degree; otherwise, you won't get a job – Student 1

Communication toh chahiye, chahe kisi se baat karni ho ya apni baat samjhaani ho. (Communication is needed in every field, whether to talk to someone or explain your ideas.) – Student 2

Communication skills matlab English mein baat karna. (Communication skills means to be able to speak in English.) – Student 3

Students equated communication skills with language skills only, not understanding the larger and hidden agenda of effective communication, like establishing relationships, influencing people, or developing teamwork. This narrow understanding indicates the lack of formal discussions or training on soft skills in their curriculum.

These answers highlight the inability of the students to distinguish between proficiency in language and the extensive uses of communication which are vital to professional achievement (Bunyamin et al., 2022).

Students' Perception of Essential Skills and its Relevance. Though students identify certain skills – like coordination, client handling, friendly behaviour, and emotional stability – as important for getting a job and excelling at a working space, they do not categorise them as soft skills. Due to this gap in understanding they further fail to understand that these skills can be intentionally learned through training and practice, rather than being developed incidentally.

Excerpts that illustrate lack of awareness about soft skills as a category:

Hume soft skills ke baare mein jaankari nahi hai, bas school activities se hi thoda bohat pta chalta hai.

(We don't have knowledge about soft skills; we just get some exposure through school activities.) – Student 2

Soft skills ko school mein nahi padhaya jaata, bas extracurricular activities hi hoti hai.

(Soft skills are not taught in school; only extracurricular activities are organised.) – Student 1

Misconception that these are natural and not trainable traits:

Clients ke sath friendly rehna ana chahiye par wo kese seekhien.

(One should know how to be friendly with clients but how to learn to do so.) – Student 3

Mere profession mein coordination zaruri hai customers key saath. Coordinate karna seekhna nahi padhta.

(Coordination is important in my profession and it is not learnt.) – Student 4

Limited recognition of the development of soft skill through training:

Main kabhi yeh nahi socha ki friendly hona aur client handling ko training ke zariye improve kar sakte hain.

(I never thought that being friendly and handling clients could be improved by training.) – Student 5

The question of whether emotional intelligence would be necessary in the workplace also reflects limited understanding when a student asked, “What is the need of Emotional balance at work?”

Students’ Perception of Extracurricular Activities. Students’ participation in extracurricular activities is purely as part of routine school programs. There is no focus on soft skills development by students. Many students are not keen to put extra efforts to enhance their soft skills outside of the classroom.

For example, a student stated,

Main kuch alag nahi karta soft skills ke liye, bas school ke activities mein hi participate karta hoon.

(I don’t do anything extra for soft skills; I just participate in school activities.)

Students are expected to take the initiatives for skill development by either self-directed learning or participation in such activities (Majid et al., 2012). While they lack the required knowledge of the broader purpose of extracurricular activities as a platform for skill development beyond academics, they lose the chance to develop skills like time-management, stress management, leadership, teamwork and so on. These skills are expected to help them in academics as well as their careers (Obilor, 2019).

Some did, however, provide instances of how activities- like theatre and sports- indirectly develop their soft skills.

Main theatre seekhta hoon. Acting skills improve karna chahta hoon.

(I learn theatre. I want to improve acting skills.) – Student 1

Cricket se teamwork and leadership seekhta hoon.

(Playing cricket teaches me teamwork and leadership.) – Student 2

It is worth noticing that soft skills are enhanced through participation in these activities, however, these benefits are only incidental and not intentional.

The absence of a formal method of approaching extracurricular activities restricts the ability of students to learn essential skills like leadership, teamwork, emotional intelligence, and problem-solving. Debates, sports, and performing arts are inherently meant to teach students teamwork, how to manage pressure, and communicate. Nevertheless, in the absence of

deliberate direction (Tisa et al., 2024), individuals do not fully utilize these experiences in order to grow personally and professionally.

Understanding Teachers' Perceptions of Soft Skills

Role of Soft Skills in Vocational Education. Undoubtedly, Teachers believe that soft skills are importance in vocational Education. According to the teachers, soft skills are essential for students' employability (Wats & Wats, 2009). Most teachers conveyed that technical knowledge is not enough to prepare students to deal with actual job situations, citing the role of communication, teamwork, adaptability and emotional intelligence to achieve success in their careers and life.

Technical skills alone are not enough. – Teacher 1

If students don't learn public speaking, they will not be confident? – Teacher 2

These skills like adaptability and emotional intelligence are required not just at work but also in life in general. – Teacher 3

Vocational education doesn't just mean to learn about machines. Teamwork is there to learn. – Teacher 4

In general, teachers view soft skills as a component of vocational education.

Perspective of Teachers on Key Soft Skills. Teachers opine that soft skills are as important as technical skills for students throughout their careers. They argue that technical skills are not enough, students must develop soft skills for future success.

Teachers' top soft skills ranked by priority:

- ◆ Communication Skills – Expressing thoughts and building relationships
- ◆ Creativity – Thinking out of the box, beyond regular
- ◆ Teamwork – Encouraging cooperation and companionship
- ◆ Stress Management – Managing working space pressure effectively

Communication skills were ranked as the most important soft skill for students in academic and professional life. According to the teachers, without the communication skills students will struggle expressing their views, exceling in job interviews and collaborating with others. This skill was seen essential for maintaining sociable terms with peers, mentors, and employers (Kapur, 2020).

If students can't express themselves, how will they move forward? What's the point of everything if they are unable to communicate properly? – Teacher 1

Most of them are from slums, their language is a bit crude, using curse words is also very common among the students. – Teacher 2

Teacher 2 has brought the socio-economic background of the students into picture. Due to the influence of the environment, students are more prone to use informal and rough language. However, such communication patterns can become a hinderance in workplace interactions.

Creativity is also considered important as it allows students to stand-out. Creativity helps students to think beyond textbook solutions to problems.

We want our students to think outside of the textbook.— Teacher 3

Continued discussion of creativity, teacher teaching Fashion Design for 14 years now says, "Fashion is all about uniqueness. Students who can mix colours and designs in new ways, succeed." Originality comes with a creative mind. Similarly, a teacher of subject Automobile remarks that a creative automobile mechanic can discover smarter ways to increase the performance and efficiency of vehicles. Summing up, creativity does not mean to have an artistic mind but it is a practical requirement in vocational fields to stand-out of the crowd.

Teamwork emerged as another crucial skill. Teachers pointed out that group in-class activities prepare students for real-world.

Students complete projects in groups.— Teacher 1

Being a team player is a requirement, as no one can do stand-alone work.— Teacher 2

By performing group activities or projects, students tend to be confident and gain mutual support. This prepares them for professional working spaces. Working in a team, collaborating with others, working together cohesively builds trust and respect among team members which is an essential component of success (Kumar & Deswal, 2023).

Apart from these skills, teachers emphasized the requirement of stress management for students to cope with stress in personal and professional spaces. They describe it as a skill to handle pressure at school and at work. Some excerpts to support the notion are as under:

Students must learn how to handle stress effectively as they enter the workforce. – Teacher 1

Stress management is equally necessary in personal life. – Teacher 2

Stress management is an essential skill for students as they enter the job market, and it is also crucial in their personal lives. Evidence exists that the capacity to manage stress helps in academic and professional achievement (Chen, 2016).

Teachers' Role in Developing Soft Skills. Teachers consider their role as pivotal in soft skills inculcation among the vocational education students, especially because they come from a modest background. Teachers view their role beyond teaching the academic content. Teachers acknowledge that soft skills are integral to students' future no matter what career path they choose. Here are some of the excerpts from the interviews:

It's not just about teaching a course; we are helping them learn how to communicate and work with others. – Teacher 1

These are things they'll use every day, no matter what job they do. – Teacher 2

Several teachers discussed how they incorporate soft skill development in their daily interactions and expressed the feeling of pride on watching students grow through their efforts.

A teacher explained:

When we give them group tasks or ask them to explain their ideas, they develop confidence.

Another added:

Sometimes it's not a formal lesson; it's the guidance we provide that make a big difference.

It feels great when a student who was shy in the beginning starts speaking up or taking charge of a group activity. That's when you know you've made an impact.

We're not just teaching subjects; we're helping them become better individuals who can handle challenges.

Teachers highlighted the deep influence of students' family background on their capacity to acquire soft skills. Most students enrolled in skills courses are from disadvantaged backgrounds with minimal exposure to skills such as grooming, English speaking, and interpersonal behavior. Such a background creates a greater responsibility for teachers to educate students not only academically but also socially and professionally.

One teacher shared:

Ye colony ke bache hai, inko zyada pata nahi hai. Humse hi observe karke seekhte hai grooming, English bolna, manners.

(These are kids from local colonies/slums; they don't know much. They observe and learn grooming, speaking English, and manners from us).

This observation highlights the socio-economic plight of disadvantaged children, more so those who live in slums, according to Arora (2016). Students come from homes where initial exposure to refined communication, professional courtesy, and building confidence is limited. Parents may be working in daily wage jobs, small enterprises, or other physically demanding work, leaving little time or means to devote to skills development. The domestic setting, though nurturing on its own terms, may fall short on the discipline or experience needed to develop such soft skills.

The role of teachers, therefore become highly crucial. They act as mentors by fostering soft skills via classroom interactions, where they correct students' language, teach professional presentation styles, and encourage better grooming habits.

Challenges Being Faced by Teachers in Soft Skills Teaching

Lack of Teacher Training. Vocational teachers do not feel fully equipped in teaching soft skills, reporting the lack of training in soft skills teaching. They also feel the dearth of time and proper channels or resources in doing so.

As one teacher shared:

We understand soft skills are crucial, but we don't have time or resources to teach them specifically in a well-planned way.

Therefore, without structured training, teachers feel unequipped to prepare students for professional demands.

Reduction in Practical Work. Another key issue for teachers is the drastic decline in practical work in vocational courses, which they think is essential for developing skills. Previously, 60% of vocational education was hands-on practical work, but this has now fallen to 40%, compromising students' capacity to convert theoretical knowledge into practical skills:

Earlier, 60% of the work was practical, but now it's only 40%. Practical work is essential in vocational courses, but it has reduced significantly. – Teacher 1

Fieldwork has been reduced. Earlier, students were sent to local shops for internships, and they were graded based on that. – Teacher 2

Practical training being reduced is preventing students from getting real-world experience, as a result their readiness for employment is getting compromised. Teachers believe, on expanding the practical work, vocational education will prove more impactful.

Obsolete Equipment and Restricted Usage. Another limitation highlighted by teachers is the obsolete equipment in vocational labs (Sharma, 1997). Students are also restricted to use them, primarily over the risk pertaining to the potential damage to the equipment. Hands-on training is replaced by mere demonstrations. As a result of the limited exposure to tools or equipment, students' readiness for the world of work is at stake. Here are some excerpts from the interview:

If students damage it, the responsibility falls on the teacher, so only demonstrations are given. – Teacher 1

Instead of allowing students to use the equipment, they are just shown how it works. This affects their learning. – Teacher 2

Soft Skills Integration. Teachers pointed out that soft skills training needs to be intentional as it can not develop naturally through vocational training alone. It needs explicit instructions. However, the current curriculum lacks specific modules or allocated time for soft skills. It is also pointed out by the teachers that extracurricular activities assist, but are not enough to teach soft skills.

Soft skills are important, but they are not included in the syllabus. We don't have time to teach them separately. – Teacher 1

If specific lectures were included in the syllabus, we would teach soft skills specifically. – Teacher 2

Successful soft skill development necessitates intentional curriculum design and intervention activities directed at market demands (Sanwal & Chouksey, 2019).

Teacher Constraints. Vocational teachers are confronted with enormous challenges by contractual employment, reduced salaries, and limited job security, affecting their motivation and job satisfaction. Rice et al. (2024) emphasize that low pay and job insecurity are long-standing concerns, which contribute to frustration and undervaluation.

I teach on contractual basis, get paid less, but do full-time work. – Teacher 1

Not getting permanent status reduces motivation, but we still try to do our best. – Teacher 2

Teachers are committed despite these difficulties, but lack of support may interfere with their capacity to be fully engaged in teaching and professional development.

Student Attitude and Perception. A common issue emphasized by instructors is the absence of student interest in vocational studies. Students view these programs as an alternative option instead of a preferred profession, primarily because of a lack of awareness about their importance (Sharma, 1997).

Sometimes students don't take admission out of choice; they join vocational education due to unsuccessful admissions elsewhere. – Teacher 1

This lack of awareness influences motivation and engagement, hindering students' ability to understand the real-world applications of vocational skills. In the absence of recognizing their significance, students are inclined to perceive learning as solely academically focused, which diminishes enthusiasm for practical training. This situation not only impacts individual career readiness but also detracts from the overall efficacy of the vocational education framework.

Discrepancies in Implementation of Employability Skills: A Researcher's Perspective

Employability skills in vocational education are a compulsory component, as mandated by the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. However, it is facing a number of implementation gaps. While the Central Board of Secondary Education has incorporated employability skills with 5 units namely- communication, self-management, ICT, entrepreneurial, and green skills into the curriculum from IX to XII standards, insights drawn from interviews with teachers and students indicate that the desired outcomes are not being entirely achieved on the ground.

Employability skills need to be imparted through experiential learning, extra-curricular activities, practical projects, institutional leadership and academics-industry linkages to be impactful (Nghia, 2019; Tiwari & Malati, 2020). But these skills are being imparted in a theoretical and examination-oriented format, and hence students cannot practice them in real-life situations. Here are some excerpts from the interviews:

CBSE has incorporated employability skills into the syllabus, but it has not provided adequate training for teachers. – Teacher 1

Employability skills are instructed just to sit the theory exam, but not put into practice. – Teacher 2

Although CBSE has conducted teacher training webinars and programmes with regards to employability skills, however, their adoption is uneven, with most educators continuing to find it difficult to incorporate this subject into practical learning activities. As stated by a teacher, “We explain it in theory class, and there is no time for activities.”

Teachers report that assessment frameworks focus more on theory than practical applications, which restricts students’ motivation as well.

Students would be helped if these skills are integrated with projects or internships. They need to observe how these skills are required in actual work settings.

The sample question papers, available on the official website, of CBSE, reflect that the focus is given almost entirely on written examinations rather than competency-based testing. Researcher, therefore, argues that without practical assessments and workplace-based learning, students will struggle to translate employability skills into real career opportunities.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Raising Awareness About Skill Education

Students should be informed of the significance of skill education (Rahate Ellah & Azmi, 2023; Sharma, 1997), which covers technical skills as well as soft skills—both necessary for future careers (Tisa et al., 2024). Although technical skills equip individuals with the required information for particular professions, interpersonal skills like communication, collaboration, and analytical problem-solving enable professional growth. With the aim to achieve this goal, schools should establish awareness programs, workshops, counselling sessions, guest lectures, and interactions with professionals. Students must be encouraged to participate in extracurricular activities that promote soft skills. By raising awareness at an early stage, students will appreciate the need to develop technical and interpersonal skills, hence being better equipped for the changing job market.

Embedding Soft Skills Into the Core Curriculum

Educational institutions must officially incorporate soft skills courses into their curriculum (Akinbode et al., 2023; Romanova, 2022). This includes creating structured modules or courses that instruct students on how to effectively interact in a work environment. The courses do not have to be purely theoretical and can include real-life training like; interactive classes in which students participate in group work and discussions, role-playing exercises that simulate workplace scenarios, helping students learn how to handle real-life challenges, project-oriented learning that fosters group work and cooperation, and case studies to examine real-life examples of good and bad communication, leadership, and decision-making.

Apart from this, tests of soft skills and employability skills have to be unlike regular examinations. Rather than written examinations, organizations can conduct tests by giving presentations, organizing group discussions, and project-based problem-solving exercises.

Teacher Wellbeing in Soft Skills Teaching

For teachers to effectively impart instructions and skills, their own wellbeing plays a vital role (Belmonte et al., 2022; Ghamravi et al., 2023; Schmitz, 2024). Soft skills training is not a one-time activity, thus, continuous professional development by way of workshops, seminars, and online resources will help them be updated to the changing trends and practices of soft skills training.

Improving contractual status of teachers is also important. Fair and competitive salaries; opportunities for permanent employment can keep the teachers motivated and emotionally sound. This can have a positive impact on their teaching practices as researches have inferred that teachers' wellbeing is positively correlated with the socio-emotional development in students.

Conclusively, the study reveals gaps in vocational students' knowledge, adoption, and use of soft skills despite their essentiality for job success. Students are keen to learn and the teachers are agreeable to teaching them, yet institutional obstacles such as ignorance, poor teacher training, and an overemphasis on theoretical knowledge delay effective implementation. A multifaceted solution is thus essential, prioritizing curriculum restructuring, teacher training, and experiential learning experiences. Filling these gaps not only will increase the employability of students but also will give them the confidence and resilience required to survive and succeed in an evolving professional world.

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