

RETHINKING EMPLOYABILITY: IS NEP 2020 RELEVANT FOR INDIA'S AI-DRIVEN FUTURE?

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ABSTRACT

Artificial Intelligence, as a disruptive force, is bringing unprecedented changes in the skills and competencies required for a graduate to become employable in today's day and age; however, India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has come forward as a framework for strengthening higher education through the inclusion of multidisciplinary learning, skill development, practical exposure, and increasing alignment with industry requirements. This paper examines whether these strategies remain sufficiently responsive to an evolving AI-driven labour market. The study employs a mixed-method approach, combining a review of existing literature with primary questionnaire-based research. On the survey responses of students and professionals, the study applies descriptive statistics, frequency distributions, percentages, and mean scores to assess perceptions of implementation, AI readiness, and emerging skill requirements. Further, it uses a thematic analysis to compare the emerging patterns with themes identified in the literature. The findings indicate that although NEP 2020 provides a relevant framework for developing multidisciplinary and future-oriented competencies, gaps remain between its intended provisions and students' practical exposure to AI-related skills, industry requirements, and employability preparation, suggesting that the policy is conceptually relevant but insufficiently aligned with emerging AI-era requirements. The study recommends increased emphasis on effective policy implementation and a shift in the core framework towards AI literacy, upskilling and greater integration of digital and data capabilities within higher education.

KEY WORDS

National Education Policy 2020, Employability, AI Literacy, Multidisciplinary Learning, Higher Education, Future-ready Skills

1. INTRODUCTION

Education has served as the one of the strongest foundational pillars of India's socio-economic development, particularly since independence. It is believed that we have relied on acquiring knowledge as a gateway towards innovation and economic prosperity and progress, including development in all aspects of life such as religion, history, sociological concepts and science. More often than not, the world can go through disruption by some incoming technology and that can bring changes in how things are done. Artificial Intelligence's (AI) arrival is pointing towards a disruption in the education sector and all its aspects, whether it be the gathering of knowledge, articulation of ideas and dissemination of that knowledge for further refinement. Consequently, areas of human society connected to education would also face disruptive changes, and that includes employability. The relationship between education and employability is connected through the dependence of the latter on the former, and changes in one might lead to a need for transformation in the other. Artificial Intelligence has this potential to bring alterations to the competencies required to get employed and stay employed.

Employability could be defined as a mix of knowledge, skills, competencies, and personal attributes that enable individuals to obtain and remain employed within changing labour-market conditions (*Schneider & Pilz, 2024*). It is evidently different from employment, as employment is the individual's actual participation in paid work, and from job creation, which is the generation of employment opportunities within an economy. Similarly, skills represent capabilities that may contribute to employability, and labour-market outcomes mean observable results such as employment, retention, earnings, or occupational changes (*Scandurra et al., 2024*). This distinction is quite important because improvements in skills or employability may not automatically translate into employment outcomes, as they might also be shaped by other factors such as social, economic, or institutional conditions. (*Schneider & Pilz, 2024; Scandurra et al., 2024*). Artificial Intelligence (AI), for the purposes of this study, refers to the studies and methods employed in making computers and machines think and work in ways that humans do and applications created through that method, including but not limited to generative AI bots and large-language models. The *World Economic Forum (2025)* identifies AI as the technology causing changes in the labour market and emphasising on increasing demand for analytical thinking, AI literacy, technological proficiency, creativity, and lifelong learning. Similarly, the *OECD (2025, 2026)* emphasizes that AI adoption might be increasing demand for highly skilled workers, and as a result continuous upskilling and updating current knowledge and skills is becoming quite essential. The *International Labor Organization (2025)* also notes that generative AI is more likely going to transform tasks rather than displacing the employed or ending job. This transformation is often generally categorized as augmentation and this transformation also brings workforce adaptability as a policy focus for stakeholders. Academic models of the status quo in which degrees and examination performances were examined may slowly be put to question as increasing demand in labor markets for adaptability, interdisciplinary thinking, and digital competencies, instead of the routine application of rote

learning (Pandey & Pandey, 2026), is brought into focus. This is where the introduction of the *National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020)* represents a historic attempt to respond to these disruptive changes that are being faced by the education sector. The focus of NEP 2020 is defined succinctly by the words 'Access, Equity, Quality, Affordability & Accountability'. Developed under the leadership of Dr K. Kasturirangan, former Chairman, Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO), NEP 2020 is a comprehensive policy for India's education system that aims to bring flexibility in Indian education by bringing in a multidisciplinary and skill-oriented approach, along with a focus on addressing gaps in job readiness, practical learning, and curriculum adaptability. Its importance and relevance are highlighted by the increase in India's employability from 54.81% in 2025 to 56.35% in 2026, as stated by the *India Skills Report 2026*, which also states that 39% of core workplace skills are set to face changes by 2030 (*World Economic Forum, 2025*), emphasizing the need for an adaptive education system to address this shifting educational environment. NEP 2020 aims to fulfil its objectives using initiatives like the National Credit Framework (NCrF), Open Distance Learning (ODL), Multiple Entry and Multiple Exit points (MEME), Multidisciplinary Education and Research Universities (MERUs), and integration of vocational education programs as well as technology-driven platforms into mainstream education, and many more. However, the institutional reality of these reforms remains a subject of debate. Existing research often focuses on the implementation of the policy, both in terms of its scope and the detailed implementation of the provisions of the policy. But there is very limited empirical evidence examining whether the proposed reforms acknowledge the evolving skill demands of an AI-driven and disrupted economy. This study essentially addresses that gap by analyzing the alignment between AI-driven industry skill requirements and how they have changed, with the competencies and provisions promoted under NEP 2020 and if they align with these changes. Our aim is to aid the formation of future education policies, workforce development, and skill-planning in India on the basis of our own ground level inputs and already established literature.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 AI-Driven Economy and Impact on Employability

Literature on AI is continuously increasing and is pointing towards restructuring of labor markets, tasks performed at work and the skills required for staying relevant in the employment market. AI characteristics point towards it being a general-purpose technology that may have implications for productivity, organizational methods and innovation along with distribution of economic activity through sectors (Filippucci et al., 2024). However, the idea has become complex in recent times. Now, the focus has shifted towards changes in task composition and allocation between humans and AI tools/assistants and how humans can use these tools/assistants responsibly and effectively. This change is brought to the center of the literature

on displacement and augmentation, with *Acemoglu and Restrepo (2019)* arguing that technology-based change may simultaneously provide substitution for workforce in some tasks and even create new tasks where humans still hold a comparative advantage.

More recent evidence on AI adoption similarly indicates that its effects may be more pronounced in the transformation of worker tasks than in overall employment levels. Using firm-level survey evidence from the United States, AI use was linked with changes in tasks performed by workers considerably more frequently than with changes in firm employment. These findings support an interpretation of AI as a technology that can restructure the content of work without necessarily producing an equivalent change in the number of jobs (*Bonney et al., 2024*).

The effects of AI also vary across sectors and occupations because the scope for automation and augmentation depends partly on task composition and partly on organizational context. AI-related technological changes can affect routine-based activities like clerical work while increasing the importance of analytical, creative, managerial, and digitally intensive activities (*Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2019; Filippucci et al., 2024*); extending this, AI should not be treated as having uniform effect across occupations. The implications on labor-market caused by it largely depend upon how it is adopted; for example, what type of tasks are being augmented or automated, how organizations redraw the method of doing the work, along with limits established, to where human judgement and expertise remain important (*Bonney et al., 2024*).

The literature also identifies a broad spectrum-based shift in employability requirements where tasks that are specifically “human”, like cognitive, interpersonal and decision-making, are being assisted and may even be performed by AI-based tools, making skills related to AI highly relevant and under the same umbrella of importance as cognitive, digital, interpersonal and adaptive capabilities. The important thing to note here is that these emerging AI-based competencies should not be viewed as alternatives to problem-solving, professional proficiency, critical thinking and judgment, professional expertise and communication skills. The future of AI-enabled work might need the addition of one more skill to this highly relevant skills group, that being the ability to properly evaluate and use AI-generated outputs and understands AI’s limitations.

This transformation places Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) under pressure to reconsider how graduates are prepared for work. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 responds to some of these challenges through its emphasis on multidisciplinary education, curricular flexibility, technology-enabled learning, experiential learning, and broader competency development (*Ministry of Education, 2020*). These provisions provide a broad policy foundation for developing capabilities that may be relevant to an AI-driven labor market. However, the alignment between policy aspirations and the competencies identified in the AI-

employability literature cannot be assumed. A key issue is therefore whether HEIs are translating these principles into curricula and learning experiences that develop AI literacy, critical thinking, adaptability, problem-solving, and effective human–AI collaboration.

The literature is pointing to a shift from viewing AI as a source of displacement in employment and more of a task-transforming catalyst for changing employability requirements (*Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2019; Bonney et al., 2024*). Existing research largely focuses on changes in skills needed and tasks due to AI adoption but there is a lack of attention towards changing requirements in higher-education institutions (HEIs) and their supporting structures, including education strategies, priorities set and analysis of problems faced, particularly in the Indian context. Therefore, an intricate examination is needed of the adaptation strategies of HEIs or the lack thereof, in preparing graduates for an economy disrupted by AI.

2.2 NEP: Strengths, Weaknesses and Implications

The relevance of NEP 2020 to an AI-driven labor market can be assessed through four areas: interdisciplinary education, digital and AI literacy, vocational preparation, and adaptability. The policy addresses these areas to varying degrees, providing a broad foundation while leaving some AI-specific competencies less explicitly defined (*Ministry of Education [MoE], 2020; Williams, 2026*).

Initiatives such as MERUs, flexible learning pathways, and interdisciplinary programmes such as “AI + X” are included to target and provide multidisciplinary education, helping students in building technological and analytical capabilities without taking focus away from contemporary disciplinary studies. It supplements this system by focusing on project-based learning that can be applied, which in turn supports critical thinking, problem solving and creativity. (*MoE, 2020; Raju, 2020*).

The policy document includes several provisions for digital learning, including the National Educational Technology Forum (NETF), technology-enabled teaching systems such as SWAYAM, DIKSHA, NDEAR and specialized AI and Machine Learning programmes (MoE, 2020). However, these provisions do not necessarily ensure foundational AI literacy across disciplines. Vocational integration, project-based learning and practical education further support workplace-oriented preparation. However, their contribution to employability depends on the quality of implementation and their connection with industry requirements (*MoE, 2020; Narayan et al., 2024*). There are provisions such as Multiple Entry and Multiple Exit (MEME) and the National Credit Framework (NCrF) which have the potential to support and promote flexibility based on continuous learning, but they represent an indirect support for adaptability rather than an explicit mention or intention of adaptability for an AI based era competency (MoE, 2020).

NEP 2020 focuses on broader cognitive and creative capabilities and aims to achieve multidisciplinary integration through flexibility with indirect promotion of emerging AI-specific competencies. This creates a policy gap in areas such as AI literacy and adaptability which will indeed be needed. (*MoE, 2020; Williams, 2026; Huang, 2025*).

3. RESEARCH GAP

Despite the growing literature on AI and employability and the extensive scholarship examining NEP 2020, several gaps remain at their intersection:

First, there exists a lot of research on our two central ideas: AI-driven changes in employment and NEP 2020, but largely as separate domains. While studies identify the competencies increasingly demanded by AI-enabled workplaces, limited empirical research assesses whether the competencies promoted through NEP are sufficiently aligned with these changing requirements across disciplines. Similarly, existing evaluations of NEP tend to focus on its policy provisions, implementation challenges, and broader educational objectives rather than examining whether these provisions translate into perceived and measurable improvements in graduate employability in an AI-driven labor market.

Second, existing discussions often assume that effective implementation of NEP will improve employability, without sufficiently questioning whether the policy framework itself remains adequate.

Finally, very limited empirical evidence captures the perspectives of students and working professionals directly regarding the NEP's skill development and technologically oriented provisions compared to contemporary employment requirements. In light of this understanding, this study attempts to evaluate whether NEP 2020's provisions align with the ever-changing employability requirements caused by the arrival of AI and the dawn of an AI-driven economy and examine how NEP's implementation and labor market changes are being perceived by the affected students and workforce.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

This study adopts a concurrent mixed-method design, with a qualitative approach being on the dominant side and a cross-sectional survey approach, which captures student and professional perceptions of NEP 2020's relevance to India's AI-driven economy. The design is exploratory and descriptive rather than experimental.

4.2 Population, Sampling and Data Collection Procedure

Two populations were surveyed: students in higher education and working professionals involved in hiring or people management. A non-probability convenience/snowball sample was drawn through the research team's networks (n=51 students, n=38 professionals). Data were collected using a questionnaire made using the Google Forms platform. Findings are indicative in nature.

4.3 Instrument Design

Two survey instruments, combining closed (Objective) and open-ended (Subjective) items, were developed and grounded in existing literature (NASSCOM, WEF, ILO, NEP 2020). Items were organized into constructs for conceptual clarity and internally reviewed before distribution to remove ambiguity.

4.4 Data Analysis

Given the mixed item formats across both instruments, three complementary methods were used, each matched to the data type it best suits: Likert-scale analysis, Frequency and Percentage analysis, and Thematic analysis.

4.5.1 Likert-Scale Analysis

Likert and 5-point scale items were coded 1–5 and analyzed using mean and standard deviation (SD). The Mean indicates the overall direction of opinion ($M > 3.25 = \text{Positive}$, $2.75 < M < 3.25 = \text{Neutral}$, $M < 2.75 = \text{Negative}$), while the Standard Deviation indicates whether that mean reflects genuine consensus or divided perceptions ($SD > 1.2 = \text{High variation}$, $0.8 < SD < 1.2 = \text{Moderate variation}$, $SD < 0.8 = \text{Low variation}$); both are reported together throughout. Tables 1 and 2 illustrate this method with full calculation, using one representative item from each survey.

Table 1: Student Survey - "My institution provides sufficient opportunities to develop digital and AI-related competencies."

Response	Code	Frequency	Weighted (Code × Freq)	Freq × (Code – Mean) ²
Strongly Disagree	1	5	5	13.56
Disagree	2	18	36	7.54
Neutral	3	20	60	2.49
Agree	4	6	24	10.98
Strongly Agree	5	2	10	11.07
Total (N)	51			
Mean	2.65			
Standard Deviation	0.96			

Analysis: Lowest mean in the student dataset, with a relatively low SD indicating consistent agreement that AI-competency opportunities are lacking.

Table 2: Professional Survey - "My formal education prepared me to use AI tools effectively in my workplace."

Response	Code	Frequency	Weighted (Code × Freq)	Freq × (Code – Mean) ²
Strongly Disagree	1	6	6	18.65
Disagree	2	13	26	7.57
Neutral	3	6	18	0.34
Agree	4	10	40	15.3
Strongly Agree	5	3	15	15.01
Total (N)	38			
Mean	2.76			
Standard Deviation	1.24			

Analysis: Lowest mean and highest SD in the professional dataset. Read with Table 1, this points to a cross-dataset education-to-practice AI skills gap.

4.5.2 Frequency and Percentage Analysis

Frequency tables and percentages were used to analyse the questionnaire's non-Likert, non-open-ended items through descriptive quantitative methods. Relevant questions were categorized by response type, mainly multiple-choice/checkbox, single-choice, and numerical or ordinal questions. Frequencies were calculated to determine how many respondents selected each option, while percentages represented each response as a proportion of the total sample. Single-choice responses were treated as mutually exclusive, so percentages reflected the

sample as a whole; multiple-response items were analyzed independently, meaning their frequencies and percentages were calculated for each option and were not expected to total 100%. The resulting distributions were examined for significant patterns, preferences, obstacles, and trends, which were then connected to themes identified in the literature review. Following are two representative example items from each survey:

Table 3: Student Survey - “Biggest challenge preventing access to quality higher education.”

Response option	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Lack of career guidance or information	17	33.3
High cost of higher education (tuition fees and related expenses)	12	23.5
Poor quality of colleges or universities	7	13.7
Limited availability of courses or academic programmes	7	13.7
Admission or eligibility requirements	5	9.8
Family or personal responsibilities	2	3.9
Distance to, or lack of transportation to, educational institutions	1	2.0

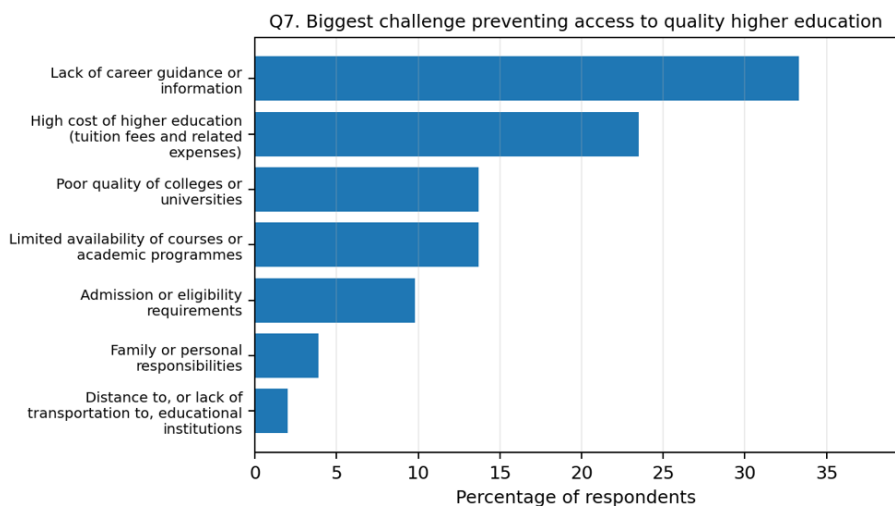
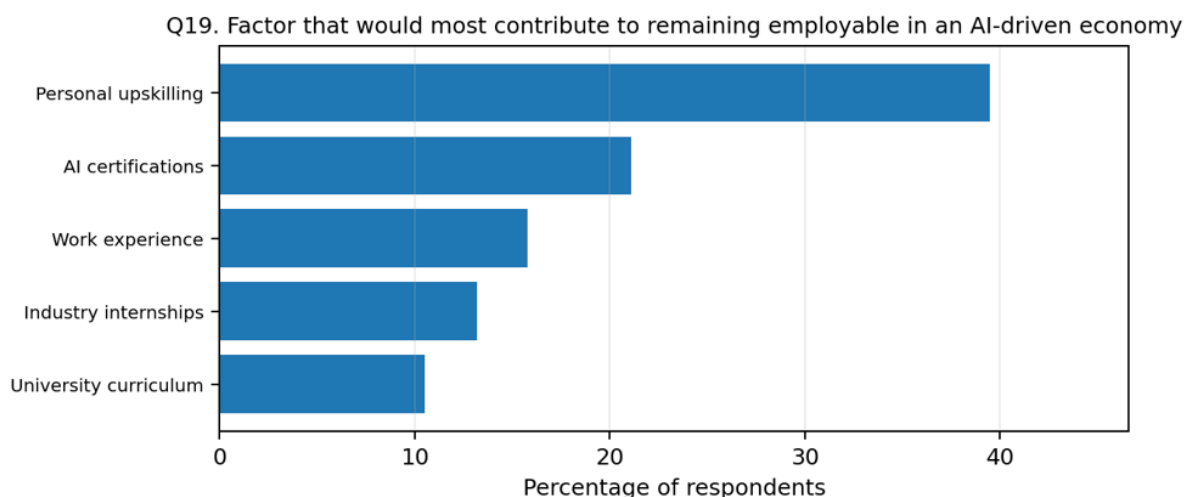


Table 4: Professional Survey - “Factor that would most contribute to remaining employable in an AI-driven economy.”

Response option	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Personal upskilling	15	39.5
AI certifications	8	21.1
Work experience	6	15.8
Industry internships	5	13.2
University curriculum	4	10.5



4.5.3 Thematic Analysis

A qualitative document-analysis approach was used to identify AI-era skill requirements and assess their alignment with NEP 2020. Relevant literature (*present in Annexure 1*) was coded into seven skill categories using binary source-level coding (*1 = mentioned; 0 = not mentioned*). Literature prominence was visualized through a bar chart. The literature-mention bar chart summarizes findings from 55 sources on AI-era skill requirements. Skill co-occurrence was assessed using the Jaccard similarity coefficient, $J(A, B) = \frac{|A \cap B|}{|A \cup B|}$, to identify relationships between competencies. Finally, each skill was coded for NEP alignment on a 0-2 scale (*0 = not addressed, 1 = partial/indirect, 2 = explicit*), and compared with literature prominence through a horizontal bar chart.

4.6 Validity

Given the sample size and exploratory scope, formal reliability testing (e.g., Cronbach's Alpha) was not conducted. Validity was instead established through content plausibility (literature grounding), face validity (internal review), and triangulation between quantitative and qualitative findings.

4.7 Ethical Considerations

Standard ethical protocols that were followed are as follows- voluntary participation was assured, informed consent, anonymity in all aspects, and secure data storage, with no personally identifying information that can be linked to individual responses was stored or disseminated.

5. ANALYSIS/FINDINGS

The analysis is combined with student and professional survey findings, literature, and NEP 2020 analysis to assess AI-era employability. Survey responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics and percentages, and then compared with literature trends and NEP alignment.

5.1 Student Perceptions of NEP Implementation and AI Readiness

A gap between policy intent and institutional implementation is suggested by student responses. A shift towards practical learning was generally recognized by students: the question on internships, projects, skill-based courses, and industry exposure recorded a mean of 3.58. However, weaker perceptions of effective implementation of skill-development initiatives were reported ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 1.15$), indicating uneven experiences across institutions.

Table 1. Practical learning opportunities and implementation of skill-development initiatives

Q3 Response	Code	Frequency	Q4 Response	Code	Frequency
Strongly Disagree	1	2	Strongly Disagree	1	9
Disagree	2	6	Disagree	2	10
Neutral	3	11	Neutral	3	21
Agree	4	23	Agree	4	7
Strongly Agree	5	8	Strongly Agree	5	4
Total (N)		50	Total (N)		51
Mean		3.58	Mean		2.75
Standard Deviation		1.09	Standard Deviation		1.15

This pattern is also visible in AI-related preparation. While 39.2% considered NEP provisions moderately relevant and 23.5% considered them very or extremely relevant, 78.4% reported that AI or technology-related courses had been introduced only to a small or moderate extent. Only 7.8% had completed a full AI-related course, while 41.2% reported receiving none of the listed AI-related training through placement or career offices. Access was also unequal, with 58.8% identifying limited access to paid or advanced AI tools as a barrier and 52.9% identifying lack of training.

Table 2. Student views on NEP relevance and introduction of AI/technology-related

NEP Relevance	Frequency	%	AI/technology course introduction	Frequency	%
Not at all relevant	4	7.8	Not introduced	3	5.9
Slightly relevant	15	29.4	Small extent	18	35.3
Moderately relevant	20	39.2	Moderate extent	22	43.1
Very relevant	9	17.6	Large extent	3	5.9
Extremely relevant	3	5.9	Extensively	5	9.8
Total courses	51	100	Total	51	100

Table 3. Barriers to effective and productive AI use among students

Barrier	Frequency	% of sample
Paid-tool access	30	58.8
Lack of training	27	52.9
Verification difficulty	20	39.2
Assignment-focused use	19	37.3
Discipline-specific guidance	13	25.5
Lack of awareness	12	23.5
Unclear institutional rules	11	21.6
Unclear career benefits	11	21.6
Device/internet access	10	19.6
Language difficulties	5	9.8
No significant barriers	3	5.9
Don't know	1	2.0

Note: Multiple-response question; percentages do not sum to 100%.

Despite these gaps, 78.4% students believed AI had already changed employer skill requirements, while 72.5% expected at least moderate AI automation or assistance in their future professions. Their confidence in formal education was lower, with employability confidence averaging 2.84, suggesting that awareness of change is stronger than confidence in institutional preparation.

5.2.1 Professional Assessment of Graduate Readiness

Professional responses support the student findings. Nearly 90% reported using one to five AI tools, 81.5% expected moderate-to-high AI automation within five years, and 73.7% reported meaningful changes in employer skill requirements. Yet graduate readiness remained limited: only 13.2% considered graduates well prepared for AI-related requirements, and the mean readiness score was 2.87, closely matching the student score of 2.84.

Table 4. Student employability confidence and professional assessment of graduate AI readiness

Student response	Code	Frequency	Professional response	Code	Frequency
Strongly Disagree	1	4	Very Poorly	1	3
Disagree	2	13	Poorly	2	4
Neutral	3	22	Adequately	3	26
Agree	4	11	Well	4	5
Strongly Agree	5	1	Very Well	5	0
Total (N)		51	Total (N)		38
Mean		2.84	Mean		2.87
Standard Deviation		0.92	Standard Deviation		0.74

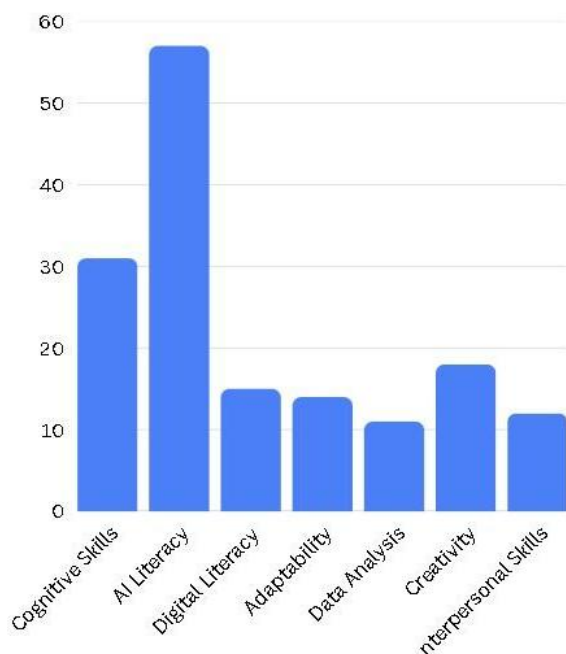
The main graduate gaps identified were critical thinking/problem-solving (42.1%) and practical application of knowledge (34.2%). Professionals also valued internships and skill-based training more than classroom learning and identified personal upskilling as the leading factor for remaining employable. This suggests that employers expect a combination of AI competence, practical experience, human judgement and continuous learning.

Table 5. Most common graduate skill gaps identified by professionals

Graduate skill gap	Frequency	%
Critical thinking/problem-solving	16	42.1
Practical application	13	34.2
Workplace adaptability	3	7.9
Digital literacy	3	7.9
Communication skills	2	5.3
Technical/subject knowledge	1	2.6
Total	38	100

5.2.2 Literature and NEP Alignment

The literature analysis shows that AI-era employability depends on a combination of technical, cognitive and human capabilities. AI Literacy records the highest prominence with 57 coded mentions, followed by Cognitive Skills (31) and Creativity (18), while Digital Literacy, Adaptability, Interpersonal Skills and Data Analysis record between 11 and 15 mentions.



Note: AI Literacy records 57 coded mentions because it includes multiple sub-themes that were coded separately and then aggregated under the broader category of AI Literacy.

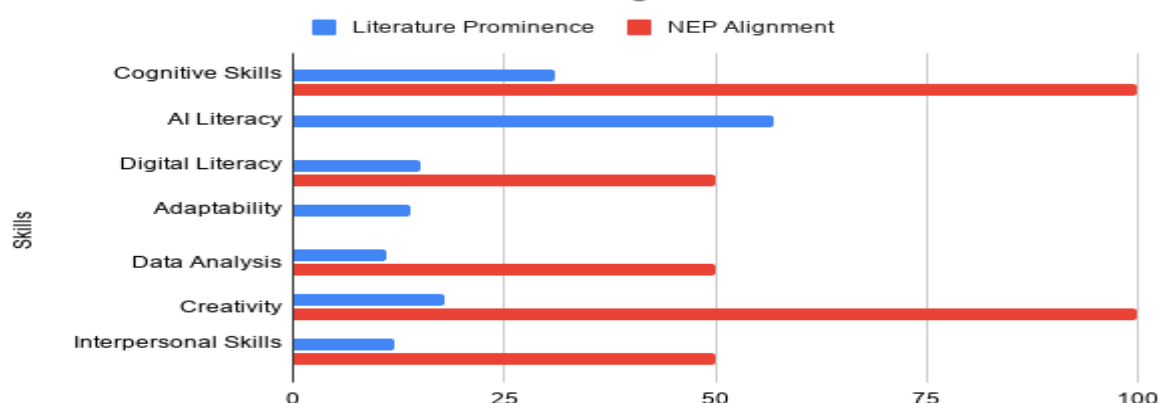
The Jaccard analysis further shows that these competencies are interconnected. Digital Literacy and Data Analysis have the strongest association as pointed by the similarity score of 0.5625, whereas Creativity and Interpersonal Skills also show substantial overlap (0.3889). Cognitive Skills are moderately associated with several other competencies; this highlights their broader role in AI-enabled work.

	Cognitive	AI Literacy	Digital Literacy	Adaptability	Data Analysis	Creativity	Interpersonal
Cognitive Skills	-	0.2979	0.2963	0.129	0.28	0.2857	0.1923
AI Literacy	0.2979	-	0.2	0.125	0.1333	0.1957	0.1628
Digital Literacy	0.2963	0.2	-	0.12	0.5625	0.2222	0.2
Adaptability	0.129	0.125	0.12	-	0.1905	0.2222	0.2632
Data Analysis	0.28	0.1333	0.5625	0.1905	-	0.2353	0.3125
Creativity	0.2857	0.1957	0.2222	0.2083	0.2353	-	0.3889
Interpersonal	0.1923	0.1628	0.2	0.2632	0.3125	0.3889	-

Code: Lighter shades indicate lower Jaccard similarity (weaker overlap), while darker shades indicate higher similarity (stronger overlap), with values ranging from 0 to 1; diagonal cells are left blank as they represent a skill's similarity with itself.

Comparison with NEP 2020 shows uneven alignment. Cognitive Skills and Creativity receiving alignment scores of 2. Digital Literacy, Data Analysis and Interpersonal Skills each receiving 1 which indicates partial or indirect alignment and finally, AI Literacy and Adaptability receiving a score of 0.

Literature Prominence and NEP Alignment



These scores represent explicit alignment established in the coding framework and do not mark a complete absence of related provisions. NEP does refer to AI and supports flexible multidisciplinary learning, but this cannot be considered or counted as universal AI literacy or an explicit framework for adaptability. The findings indicate that NEP is more strongly aligned with broad foundational capabilities than with newer AI-specific competencies emerging in the literature.

5.2.3 Overall Interpretation

The findings as a whole suggest that NEP 2020 remains relevant as an idea but it is not fully acknowledging the emerging AI-era requirements and because of that, it does not align with the same. The emphasis on critical thinking, problem-solving and creativity is very valuable, and with improved implementation, which was found to be uneven and with limited explicit attention to AI literacy, continuous upskilling and integrated digital-data capabilities may be a drawback. The evidence points towards an implementation gap in existing objectives of NEP and an emerging policy gap in newer AI-specific competencies.

6. DISCUSSION

6.1 Overall Findings

The study finds that NEP 2020 provides a relevant foundation for an AI-driven labor market, but its translation into institutional practice remains inconsistent. The policy explicitly promotes multidisciplinary education, flexible curricular structures and initiatives such as MERUs, while also encouraging interdisciplinary programmes such as “AI + X”. It identifies “digital literacy, coding, and computational thinking” among the capabilities students should develop and calls for contemporary subjects such as Artificial Intelligence to be introduced at relevant stages. NEP also establishes the National Educational Technology Forum (NETF) and promotes technology-enabled learning through platforms such as DIKSHA and SWAYAM.

The policy rightfully seeks to strengthen vocational preparation for the future through exposure, internships, apprenticeships and industry partnerships, it also focuses on lifelong learning supported by flexible learning structures including adaptability which was not explicitly mentioned. Important insights from student responses, unfortunately indicate towards limited exposure in AI-readiness and uneven implementation of the provisions present in the policy, whereas professionals responses hinting at the importance of this AI-readiness and actual readiness among graduates as moderate with highlighted gaps in critical thinking and practical application. The core gap is implementation and translation of mentioned skills in provisions into AI-specific capabilities. The findings also show something new and future relevant insight that requires more research, this being, interconnectedness of technological, cognitive and interpersonal skills with AI-era employability capabilities.

6.2 Comparison with Existing Literature

These findings largely align with NASSCOM, WEF and ILO reports identifying AI literacy and critical thinking as important future skills, reflected in AI Literacy's highest literature prominence and the similar readiness ratings of students and professionals, both around 2.8/5. However, the findings differ from more policy-optimistic accounts of NEP 2020 by indicating an implementation lag, reflected in the relatively low mean score ($M = 2.75$) for effective skill-development implementation. This may reflect the limited ability of macro-level policy literature to capture institutional-level execution.

These findings should also be interpreted under the distinction between AI-driven displacement and augmentation. AI may reduce demand for certain tasks and at the same time alter the skill requirements of particular occupations, it may also complement workers by changing task composition and increasing the importance of higher-level skills (Holm & Lorenz, 2022). Recent research similarly indicates that AI has generated demand for new skills and

competencies in various sectors of the economy, making reskilling and upskilling, under workforce adaptability (Ly, 2026). The findings suggest that changing task structures may increase the importance of AI literacy, critical evaluation, problem-solving, practical application, and the ability to adapt with changing technological environments (Chee et al., 2025; Williams, 2026). The relevance of NEP 2020 depends on its ability to prepare students for existing occupations, simultaneously developing a framework that enables them to become adaptable with transferable skills in a disrupted and changing employment environment.

6.3 Contribution

The study contributes by bringing together student and professional perceptions, literature-based skill coding, Jaccard analysis and NEP alignment mapping. Rather than only identifying a conceptual policy gap, it highlights specific areas of divergence, notably AI literacy and adaptability, which received an alignment score of 0 despite their prominence in the reviewed literature.

6.4 Methodological Limitations

The findings provide useful exploratory evidence of emerging patterns and potential policy gaps through a triangulated approach, but they should be interpreted in light of several limitations: a small, non-probability sample; cross-sectional, self-reported data; descriptive rather than inferential analysis; and an unvalidated, mixed-format questionnaire. These limitations constrain generalizability and limit causal inference.

6.5 Policy Implications and Recommendations

It is suggested by the findings that a relevant foundation for AI-era employability is provided by NEP 2020, but the implementation needs to be strengthened. Increased curriculum flexibility may be required to achieve regular updating of course content and the integration of emerging AI, digital, and data-related competencies across disciplines. The gaps in practical application identified by professionals in the survey can be addressed through stronger industry-academia linkages, internships, and live projects focused on practical exposure.

There is also a need for foundational digital and AI literacy to be promoted beyond specialized AI programmes, particularly about AI output evaluation and analysis of the said output. The effective and responsible use of AI tools, data literacy, and the ability to evaluate AI-generated outputs should be included. Increase in flexibility in learning pathways is needed to support continuous reskilling, upskilling, and lifelong learning, through which graduates and working professionals might be enabled to adapt as the characteristics of tasks and skill requirements

are changed. Through these measures, the gap in explicit AI literacy and adaptability identified by the study within NEP 2020 could be addressed.

7. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to examine whether NEP 2020 remains relevant to employability in an AI-driven economy drawing on student and professional surveys alongside a literature-based assessment of skill alignment. The findings suggest that NEP 2020 remains relevant in its emphasis on critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, multidisciplinary learning and skill development. However, the policy's translation into institutional practice remains inconsistent, and its explicit engagement with AI literacy and adaptability remains limited despite their growing prominence in contemporary literature and industry expectations. A similar conclusion was arrived at by both respondent groups even though different positions within the education to employment chain were held by them. The initiation of reforms was recognized by students, but it was noticed that there was an inconsistent implementation process, limited exposure to AI technology, and unequal access to AI and related tools. Similar gaps in critical thinking, practical application, and AI-readiness were found by professionals assessing graduates from the demand side, while classroom learning was valued less than experience-based learning. This convergence strengthens the study's core claim that the challenge facing Indian higher education is not a lack of policy vision, but a gap between that vision and its ground-level execution, compounded by an emerging policy gap in areas that have gained urgency only since NEP 2020 was drafted. The study therefore supports a twofold conclusion. First, stronger and more consistent institutional implementation is required for NEP 2020's existing objectives concerning skill-based and multidisciplinary learning. Second, more explicit incorporation of AI-era competencies is needed in the policy framework. As suggested by this study's findings, employability in an AI-driven economy is increasingly determined by human judgment, adaptability, continuous learning, and technical AI competence, rather than by AI competence alone. Although the study is limited by its sample size and design, an evidence-based starting point is provided for rethinking how graduates are prepared to work with, rather than be displaced by, AI.

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ANNEXURE 1

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