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Rethinking Higher Education in North East India: Bridging Local Realities and Global Skills for Employability

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ABSTRACT

Employability has emerged as a central concern in higher education, particularly in regions such as North East India where structural limitations, outdated curricula, and weak industry linkages continue to restrict the successful implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. This paper examines how higher education institutions in the region can bridge the gap between local socio-economic realities and the global skillsets required for a competitive workforce. With NEP's emphasis on multidisciplinary learning and skill-based education, the study investigates the extent to which institutions are able to adapt and innovate in response to these policy shifts. Adopting a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods approach, data were gathered through stakeholder interviews, focus group discussions, and policy document reviews. The analysis, guided by Rueda et al.'s (2022) competence framework, highlights persistent deficiencies in digital literacy, communication, and practical training among graduates. Findings suggest that curricular reforms are often cosmetic, while institutional challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, low faculty remuneration, and limited industry collaboration undermine meaningful progress. Nevertheless, innovative measures such as the introduction of 'Professors of Practice', regional academic clusters, and the integration of indigenous knowledge systems present promising directions for reform. The study underscores the need for context-sensitive strategies that balance global benchmarks with regional developmental priorities, thereby strengthening the employability of graduates in North East India.

Keywords: Employability; NEP 2020; North East India; Higher Education; Competence Framework; Multidisciplinary Curriculum

Introduction:

Across the world, higher education systems are being challenged to go beyond their traditional role of imparting disciplinary knowledge. Universities and colleges are increasingly expected to produce not only academically qualified graduates but also employable individuals equipped with initiative, adaptability, communication proficiency, and technological competence (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Yorke, 2006). These attributes are not incidental outcomes of education but must be deliberately cultivated through curricula and pedagogical strategies that respond to local realities while maintaining global relevance (Rueda et al., 2022).

In the Indian context, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a significant reform initiative aimed at overhauling higher education. Its vision is to create multidisciplinary institutions that offer flexible curricula and integrate vocational and liberal education in order to nurture twenty-first-century skills (UGC, 2022). Yet, the translation of these policy ambitions into practice has not been uniform. In regions such as North East India, long-standing barriers—including outdated syllabi, limited access to digital technologies, fragile industry–academia linkages, and insufficient pedagogical innovation—have slowed the pace of transformation.

The challenges in North East India are deeply structural. Home to more than 45 million people, the region has historically experienced geographic isolation, fragile institutional capacity, and relatively low industrial growth. Higher education institutions (HEIs) in this area often struggle with faculty shortages, inadequate infrastructure, and limited exposure to industry-relevant practices (UGC, 2022). As Rueda et al. (2022) emphasize, employability requires a multidimensional and competence-based approach, yet most institutions continue to rely on traditional teaching methods that are poorly aligned with such frameworks.

The problem of graduate employability is not unique to North East India but reflects a global concern. Employers across different economies frequently report a disconnect between the skills graduates possess and the competencies demanded by labor markets. Beyond technical knowledge, graduates are often found lacking in soft skills, adaptability, and workplace readiness (Finch et al., 2013; Andrews & Higson, 2008). Harvey (2001) further stresses that employability is not a fixed trait conferred at graduation but a lifelong developmental process involving the continuous acquisition of skills and competences. This challenge is particularly urgent in India, where a demographic profile dominated by youth—nearly half the population being under the age of 25—places tremendous pressure on the higher education system to create pathways into meaningful employment.

In North East India, these issues are intensified by local socio-economic conditions. The predominance of a rural economy, limited private sector participation, and the weak integration of community-based knowledge with formal education have created a persistent skills gap. While NEP 2020 emphasizes the expansion of digital and online learning, its implementation is hampered in the region by infrastructural constraints, uneven internet access, and socio-economic disparities (UGC, 2022; World Economic Forum, 2020). Consequently, the benefits of digital initiatives remain unevenly distributed, limiting their ability to transform teaching and learning in meaningful ways. Rueda et al. (2022) and Holmes (2001) remind us that competence-based frameworks cannot be applied uniformly; they must be adapted to local cultural, institutional, and academic contexts if they are to be effective.

A further challenge is the superficial adoption of employability agendas by institutions. Many HEIs claim to prepare students for employment but often lack well-defined strategies, reliable assessment tools, or sustained partnerships with industry (Rueda et al., 2022). The NEP envisions transforming Indian HEIs into multidisciplinary ecosystems by 2030, but this requires far more than formal policy statements. It demands structural reforms such as robust curricular redesign, investment in infrastructure, faculty development, strong institutional leadership, and active community engagement (UGC, 2022; Harvey, 2001). Moreover, for North East India, embedding locally relevant themes—such as environmental management, cooperative entrepreneurship, sustainable farming practices, and the integration of emerging digital skills like artificial intelligence—within management and other professional education becomes essential. Such a balance ensures that students are simultaneously prepared to compete in a globalized economy while remaining responsive to regional developmental needs.

Against this backdrop, the present paper addresses three interrelated objectives. First, it seeks to identify employability gaps among graduates in North East India and understand the structural reasons behind them. Second, it applies a competence-based framework to analyze how HEIs can align with both global skill demands and regional realities. Third, it explores opportunities for integrating indigenous knowledge systems, sustainability concerns, and digital literacy within multidisciplinary curricula. Finally, the study proposes institutional-level reforms that can enhance employability by fostering stronger industry engagement, faculty capacity, and curricular innovation.

To guide this inquiry, three central questions are posed:

- Which employability competences are most deficient among graduates in North East India, and what factors contribute to these gaps?

- How can higher education institutions restructure their curricula to respond simultaneously to global benchmarks and local developmental priorities?

- What models of practice, particularly those involving community-based learning and multidisciplinary integration, can bridge the employability divide?

By exploring these questions, the paper contributes to ongoing debates about the role of higher education in fostering inclusive, relevant, and future-ready skills. It advocates for a pragmatic yet forward-looking approach that situates the employability agenda within the dual imperatives of regional development and global competitiveness. In doing so, it seeks to frame employability not merely as a technical outcome of education but as a holistic process that connects institutions, industries, and communities in shaping the futures of young graduates in North East India.

Review of Literature:

The widening disconnect between higher education outcomes and the demands of the labour market has become a central concern in global policy and research. Employability is no longer defined solely by disciplinary expertise but also by broader competences such as communication, digital literacy, problem-solving, and adaptability. Mezghani and Turki (2025) underscore that these competences are particularly critical for students in underserved and peripheral regions, where traditional education systems often lag behind in aligning with contemporary work requirements. In a similar vein, Rueda et al. (2022) conceptualise employability within a tripartite framework that incorporates personal, background, and transversal competences, suggesting that universities must deliberately embed these dimensions in their teaching and learning processes. However, translating such frameworks into practice is constrained by rigid curricula, limited faculty preparedness, and weak industry–academia connections, especially in marginalised regions (Capelli, 2014; Suarta et al., 2017).

One pathway for reform lies in the adoption of multidisciplinary education. The UGC (2022) has strongly advocated restructuring single-stream institutions into multidisciplinary ecosystems in line with the NEP 2020 vision of flexible and skill-oriented learning. Kamala (2023) argues that combining sciences, humanities, and vocational streams encourages critical and creative engagement with real-world challenges—an approach particularly valuable for North East India's evolving economy. She also supports the NEP's multiple entry–exit system as a mechanism to reduce dropout rates and create flexible credentials for disadvantaged learners.

Equally important is the localisation of curricula. Rueda et al. (2022) emphasise the need to tailor competence frameworks to cultural and academic contexts. For North East India, this means embedding indigenous knowledge, promoting regional entrepreneurship, and addressing context-specific challenges. Dasgupta (2020) and Bynner (2002) further stress that soft skills such as leadership, teamwork, and self-confidence play a transformative role, especially for students with limited social capital.

Digital competence has emerged as another cornerstone of employability. Both the OECD (2020) and Mezghani and Turki (2025) highlight the necessity of integrating digital skills into higher education curricula. While technology-enabled platforms can expand access in remote areas, infrastructural deficits and inadequate digital training may exacerbate existing inequalities. To mitigate these issues, the UGC (2022) proposes academic clustering, whereby institutions share faculty expertise, digital platforms, and teaching resources—an approach particularly relevant for smaller colleges in resource-constrained settings.

Community-based, project-driven learning also represents a promising strategy. Rueda et al. (2022) argue that embedding education within local contexts fosters employability while strengthening ties to cooperative and rural economies, a reality that resonates strongly in North East India. Nonetheless, outdated pedagogy remains a persistent barrier. Lan (2022), as cited in Mezghani and Turki (2025), critiques the overreliance on theoretical instruction and advocates a shift toward competence-based, learner-centred teaching. For students from disadvantaged backgrounds, additional barriers such as limited mentorship, weak placement networks, and insufficient career guidance further compound the employability challenge, underscoring the urgency of institutional reforms that prioritise equity in outcomes (Mezghani & Turki, 2025).

Methodology:

This study uses a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design to explore employability challenges in North East India's HEIs. It combines document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions to identify institutional gaps and regional contexts. The research focuses on four objectives: assessing employability gaps, applying a competence-based framework to the local context, integrating indigenous knowledge, sustainability, and digital skills into education, and recommending reforms.

Primary data were collected from 78 stakeholders—academic administrators, regional employers, and recent graduates—along with two focus groups from management and professional disciplines. Purposive-clustered sampling ensured broad representation. Secondary data came from policy documents (NEP 2020, UGC 2022), literature, and institutional reports. Data were collected via virtual interviews in March–April 2025, recorded with consent, and transcribed.

Thematic content analysis was done using Rueda et al.'s tripartite competence framework. Triangulation with policy and literature ensured validity. While the study has limitations due to small sample size and reliance on self-reported data, it offers context-sensitive insights into employability reform needs in North East India.

Results and Discussion:

To evaluate the internal consistency of the instrument, Cronbach's alpha was employed. This coefficient reflects the extent to which the items on a scale collectively measure the same latent construct (Cronbach, 1951). Its value ranges between 0 and 1, with higher scores representing stronger reliability. Conventionally, an alpha of 0.70 or above is considered acceptable, while values exceeding 0.80 demonstrate good internal consistency (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was found to be 0.80 (Table 1), suggesting that the scale had good reliability.

Prior to performing exploratory factor analysis (EFA), the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) statistic was applied to test sampling adequacy. The KMO determines whether the partial correlations among variables are sufficiently low to justify factor extraction (Kaiser, 1974). The index ranges from 0 to 1, where scores above 0.80 are considered meritorious, 0.70–0.79 as middling, 0.60–0.69 as mediocre, and below 0.50 as unacceptable. In this research, the KMO value was 0.790 (Table 2), indicating that the dataset was appropriate for factor analysis.

Table 1: Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.883	.880	23

Source: Authors own calculation

Table 2: KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.790
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	592.431
	df	253
	Sig.	.000

Source: Authors own calculation

Employability Competencies (Dependent Variable):

Findings indicate that respondents generally agree, to a moderate extent, that graduates possess employability-related skills. Among the items, A3 (communication and interpersonal skills – 3.76) and A2 (digital literacy – 3.68) received the highest scores, suggesting that soft skills and digital preparedness are comparatively well addressed. By contrast, A1 (overall employment readiness – 3.46) scored lower, pointing to potential deficiencies in broader job preparedness.

Curriculum and Pedagogy (Independent Variable):

The responses reflect a largely positive perception of how curricula align with employability objectives. The highest mean score was recorded for B3 (employability-focused learning objectives – 3.77), highlighting that many institutions are embedding job relevance within their teaching frameworks. Other elements, such as practical learning opportunities (B2 – 3.67) and soft skills integration (B5 – 3.69), were also rated favourably.

Industry–Academia Linkages (Independent Variable):

This dimension emerged as the weakest area, with ratings just above the neutral mark (3.0). The lowest mean was observed for C3 (involvement of industry professionals – 3.05), underscoring limited collaboration with industry and insufficient opportunities for experiential learning or direct workplace exposure.

Regional and Indigenous Integration (Independent Variable):

Stakeholders expressed moderate agreement that regional and community-based knowledge is incorporated into higher education. D1 (integration of local knowledge into curricula – 3.67) was the highest-rated item, reflecting some responsiveness to cultural and contextual needs.

Institutional Support and Infrastructure (Independent Variable):

Perceptions regarding institutional infrastructure and policy support were mixed. While E1 (digital infrastructure – 3.41) indicated moderate adequacy, lower scores for E2 (faculty development – 3.27) and E4 (policy alignment with NEP 2020 – 3.33) suggest that greater institutional investment and alignment are needed.

Summary of Descriptive Analysis:

Overall, the descriptive analysis (Table 3) reveals that higher education institutions in North East India have achieved moderate progress in promoting employability competencies, particularly in communication, digital literacy, and critical thinking. Curriculum and pedagogy show the strongest alignment with employability objectives, especially through practical and outcome-oriented approaches. However, industry–academia engagement remains weak, with limited participation from professionals and inadequate real-world exposure. Regional and indigenous elements are moderately integrated, enhancing some contextual relevance. Institutional support—both infrastructural and policy-related—appears only average and requires significant strengthening. Taken together, while foundational competencies and curricular frameworks appear reasonably robust, institutional backing and stronger industry connectivity are critical for improving employability outcomes.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics Table

Construct	Item	Mean	Std. Dev.
Employability Competencies (A)	A1	3.46	0.7
	A2	3.68	0.71
	A3	3.76	0.63
	A4	3.58	0.66
	A5	3.63	0.76
	A6	3.6	0.74
	A7	3.59	0.65
Curriculum & Pedagogy (B)	B1	3.6	0.67
	B2	3.67	0.6
	B3	3.77	0.62
	B4	3.67	0.6
	B5	3.69	0.73
Industry-Academia Linkages (C)	C1	3.1	0.73
	C2	3.14	0.66
	C3	3.05	0.66
	C4	3.1	0.71
Regional Integration (D)	D1	3.67	0.68
	D2	3.62	0.63
	D3	3.58	0.57
Institutional Support (E)	E1	3.41	0.63
	E2	3.27	0.62
	E3	3.38	0.69
	E4	3.33	0.75

Source: Authors own calculation

The correlation analysis (Table 4) reveals strong and statistically significant positive associations between employability competencies and three core constructs: Curriculum and Pedagogy (r = 0.655), Industry–Academia Linkages (r = 0.686), and Institutional Support (r = 0.682), each significant at $p < 0.001$. Regional Integration also shows a positive correlation (r = 0.262), though its strength is comparatively weaker (p = 0.02). The multiple regression model (Table 5) accounts for about 60% of the variance in employability competencies ($R^2 = 0.601$). Within the predictors, Institutional Support ($\beta = 0.323$) and Curriculum and Pedagogy ($\beta = 0.320$) emerge as the most influential factors. By contrast, Regional Integration has a small negative and statistically insignificant beta value ($\beta = –0.044$), suggesting minimal predictive contribution. Taken together, the findings indicate that curriculum relevance, stronger industry linkages, and institutional support serve as the primary drivers of employability preparedness in the region.

Table 4: Correlation Table (Employability Competencies)

Independent Variable	**r (Correlation)**	**p-value**
Curriculum & Pedagogy	0.655	0
Industry-Academia Linkages	0.686	0
Regional Integration	0.262	0.02
Institutional Support	0.682	0

Source: Authors own calculation

Table 5: Multiple Regression Table (Predicting Employability Competencies)

Independent Variable	**Beta Coefficient**
Curriculum & Pedagogy	0.32
Industry-Academia Linkages	0.254
Regional Integration	-0.044
Institutional Support	0.323
Intercept	0.726

$R^2 = 0.601$

Source: Authors own calculation

Findings:

The study investigates the employability challenges and opportunities facing higher education institutions (HEIs) in North East India, highlighting the uneven and partial implementation of NEP 2020.

1. Employability Gaps: Despite ongoing reforms, graduates continue to fall short in transversal skills such as digital literacy, communication, teamwork, and critical thinking. Employers noted that interns frequently struggle with collaboration and presentation tasks. Alumni also observed that while technical training is available, it rarely connects to workplace realities, reflecting a gap between curriculum design and employment expectations.

2. Curriculum Misalignment: Although universities have formally adopted NEP 2020, much of the content remains heavily theoretical. As one faculty member from Tripura remarked, "The syllabus is rebranded, not reformed." Entrepreneurship and digital courses are often superficial, limiting the policy's intent of skill-oriented, learner-centred education.

3. Infrastructure Deficits: Academic staff across state colleges reported outdated laboratories and unreliable internet as major constraints. A professor from Mizoram observed, "We're ready to adapt, but labs are outdated, and internet is unreliable." Persistent urban–rural disparities further widen the digital readiness gap.

4. Insufficient Capacity Building: NEP coordinators are primarily offered online orientation with minimal practical exposure. An Assam coordinator explained, "We're told what to do, not how," pointing to the need for comprehensive professional development programs.

5. Weak Industry Linkages: Collaboration between industry and academia remains minimal, often due to limited initiative from institutional leadership. A liaison noted, "Unless vice chancellors push for tie-ups, placements won't improve," underlining the lack of internships and workplace-based training.

6. Challenges with 'Professor of Practice': Although there is support for the UGC's initiative, clear implementation guidelines and recruitment policies are absent. Senior academics stressed the importance of recognition and fair compensation for industry professionals involved in teaching.

7. Low Faculty Compensation: In private HEIs, inadequate salaries push faculty to seek freelance opportunities. One professor shared, "With this pay, we have to freelance. Teaching suffers," suggesting that poor compensation affects both academic quality and employability training.

8. Research Barriers: While NEP 2020 emphasizes research, faculty members cited insufficient funding, limited laboratory access, and heavy workloads as barriers. A researcher explained, "We're encouraged to publish but lack support," calling for greater investment in interdisciplinary and community-driven research.

9. Regional Integration: Strengthening employability requires aligning curricula with local economic sectors such as agriculture, handloom, and eco-tourism, while embedding digital and soft skills and fostering community participation (Baruah, 2020; UGC, 2021; NEC, 2020).

10. Global Competency Gaps: Several critical skill deficits were identified:

    - Entrepreneurial Agility: Limited access to innovation ecosystems.
    - Intercultural Competence: Few opportunities for international exposure.
    - Data Literacy: Insufficient training in analytics.
    - Systems Thinking: Weak integration of sustainability perspectives.

Conclusion:

This study underscores the pressing need for a transformative higher education framework in North East India—one that harmonises global employability benchmarks with the region's socio-cultural and developmental contexts. Although NEP 2020 articulates a vision of multidisciplinary, skill-oriented, and learner-centred education, its on-ground implementation remains fragmented. Curricular revisions have been undertaken, yet they often fail to reflect the dynamic requirements of the labour market. Teaching practices, in many cases, remain theoretical, outdated, and insufficiently aligned with industry expectations.

Evidence from academicians, alumni, and industry stakeholders points to persistent deficits in infrastructure, digital readiness, experiential learning opportunities, and institutional autonomy. Faculty across state-run colleges cautioned that without robust digital tools, adequate academic resources, and systematic faculty development, the aspirations of NEP cannot be fully realised. Similarly, placement officers and NEP coordinators noted that while sensitisation initiatives are in place, context-specific and practice-driven training is largely missing.

Other structural challenges—including fragile industry–academia linkages, inadequate remuneration in private HEIs, and limited research funding—continue to undermine employability outcomes. Nevertheless, the findings also highlight promising directions: emerging interest in employability models rooted in indigenous knowledge, sustainability, and community-based entrepreneurship; policy innovations such as the introduction of Professors of Practice; and the potential of academic clusters to foster collaboration. Importantly, both educators and students demonstrate a willingness to adapt and innovate.

Realising North East India's potential as a competitive and inclusive higher education hub requires a multi-pronged strategy: curriculum reform focused on competencies, investment in infrastructure parity, incentivisation of industry partnerships, recognition of evolving academic roles, and the cultivation of a robust research ecosystem. Above all, coordinated and sustained action from state and central governments is essential to translate NEP's objectives into tangible institutional outcomes.

Ultimately, bridging the divide between local realities and global skills is not merely aspirational but imperative. With collective commitment, contextual sensitivity, and sustained investment, higher education in North East India can emerge as a model of inclusive, future-ready employability.

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