

Employer Perspectives on Graduate Readiness from Industry-Integrated Higher Education Programs: A Qualitative Thematic Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This paper will look at how industry practitioners view the performance and readiness of graduates out of industry-integrated higher education programs and in this context, the study will attempt to identify the strengths and some of the chronic gaps as seen by the employer.

Design/Methodology/Approach: A qualitative research design was used that utilizes semi-structured interviews. A purposive sample of fifteen industry professionals in the fields of technology, consulting, finance, manufacturing and healthcare was selected. Braun and Clarke (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework were used to analyse data with the assistance of NVivo software.

Findings: There were five main themes: (1) increased practical skill preparation, (2) improved communication and soft skills competency, (3) more flexibility and problem-solving capacity, (4) variability in program implementation, and (5) employer eagerness to be more collaborative with industry. Although employers praise the confidence and the early exposure of graduates, significant deficiencies in critical thinking, depth of domain, and long-term flexibility remain evident.

Practical Implications: The results can be used by curriculum designers, institutions of higher learning, industry partners, and policymakers - especially when considering the priorities of the National Education Policy 2020 in India and the AICTE requirements of internships.

Originality/Value: The paper focuses on a poorly-represented employer side of the WIL literature through primary research with Indian higher education stakeholders and adds to the international graduate employability reform debate.

Keywords: Graduate Readiness, Industry-Integrated Education, Work-Integrated Learning (WIL), Employability, Higher Education and Industry Collaboration, NEP 2020, Qualitative Research.

1. INTRODUCTION

In a world where technology is quickly changing, globalisation is a reality and the constantly changing workplace is putting increased strain on the relationship between higher education and industry demands than ever before. There is a growing criticism of traditional academic programs on the basis of their minimal capability to impart job-relevant, practical skills to graduates, especially within the context of the changing and demanding labour market needs (Smith et al., 2014). Higher education programs that are industry-integrated e.g. Work-Integrated Learning (WIL), cooperative education or other experiential

learning models have become a strategic intervention in response to this widening skills gap. These programs integrate educational learning with a premeditated exposure to industry, to close the distance between theoretical and work-related knowledge (Rayner and Papakonstantinou, 2015).

This imperative has been institutionalized in India with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 which specifically promotes internships, apprenticeships, and industry partnerships as key elements of undergraduate education. All India Council of Technical Education (AICTE) has also required aspects of internship in professional degree programs, which represents a wider policy agreement that experiential learning is a requirement to create work-ready graduates (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020; AICTE, 2022). Regardless of these policy guidelines, empirical research on the effectiveness of WIL, specifically, what employers have to say about it, is scant and sporadic.

Graduate readiness is a concept that is used to denote how much graduates have the necessary technical skills, soft skills and flexibility to fit industry demand on their first day of work. Employers are also placing more and more demands on new graduates to possess not only domain-specific expertise but also critical thinking skills, communication, digital literacy, problem-solving, and cultural agility (Durham et al., 2020). But the studies indicate that there is a long-term gap between what higher learning institutions provide and the needs of the industries, which brings up the issue of employability and workforce readiness (Ngwane, 2015).

This study aims at bridging this gap by assessing the perception and evaluation of industry practitioners on the preparedness and performance of industry-integrated program graduates. The article is a contribution to the rising research on the topic of employability, industry-academia partnership, and higher education reform in the 21st-century knowledge economy, specifically within the Indian higher education context.

1.1 Research Questions

- Which are the major skills and competencies that industry practitioners require graduates of industry-integrated higher education programs to possess?
- What is the perceived job performance and workplace readiness of graduates who have undergone industry-integrated programs by industry professionals?
- How well industry-integrated programs address industry requirements and lead to long-term employability as perceived by the employers?

1.2 Research Objectives

- To investigate the perceptions of industry professionals relating to the skills and competencies and work readiness of graduates of industry-based higher education programs.
- To determine how industry professionals assess actual job performance and adaptability of graduates who have been through industry-integrated programs.
- To determine the degree to which industry-integrated programs meet industry requirements and enhance long-term graduate employability, in the eyes of employers.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 What is Graduate Work Readiness?

Graduate work readiness is now being considered as a multidimensional concept that encompasses technical competence, interpersonal effectiveness, and organisational knowledge. According to Caballero and Walker (2013), four key dimensions of work readiness are work competence, personal characteristics, organisational acumen and social intelligence. These dimensions are crucial because they resonate with

the dynamic employer requirements, which entail more than the knowledge in the domain. Caballero et al. also elaborated a validated measurement instrument to measure these characteristics and that too in the context of Australian graduates which suggests the increasing concern on readiness as a quantifiable outcome. The overlap between NEP 2020 focus on competency-based learning with the internship requirements of AICTE is an indication of a policy initiative to institutionalise analogous multidimensional readiness systems in India (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020).

2.2 Future Expectations in the Industry and the Skills Gap.

Regardless of the attempts made in curriculum development, there is still an apparent gap between graduate attributes and those required by the industry. Richardt et al. (2024) found that more than 60% of employers felt that graduates lacked adequate skills in oral communication, report writing, and knowledge synthesis. The same findings have been inferred in the fields of engineering and business in the international arena. In India, the industry associations, including NASSCOM, and the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) have surveyed engineering and management courses and have consistently recorded that a large percentage of the graduates need to undergo extensive retraining before they can play a productive role in their jobs (CII-Deloitte, 2021). Mandal and Edwards (2022) found that WIL placements increased graduate employability (technical and teamwork skills) more favorably. However, such soft skills as critical thinking or cultural awareness are usually not well-developed without purposeful pedagogical measures.

2.3 Impact of Industry-Integrated Learning

Industry-Integrated Learning (IIL) also known as Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) has become a viable tool of filling such skill gaps. According to O'Regan et al. (2023), graduates who attended co-designed modules with employer engagement demonstrated statistically significant increases in emotional intelligence and employability; in simulated hiring processes, 70% of these students were selected over their counterparts. Aprile and Knight (2020) confirm that students participating in WIL placements demonstrate better reflective thinking, professional judgement and workplace participation. Indian institutions, which have implemented an education system based on outcome (OBE) as per the WIL elements have reported better placement rates, and scores on employer satisfaction, but empirical evidence has not yet been systematically assessed.

2.4 WIL Implementation challenges.

WIL programs do not always succeed. According to Richardt et al. (2024), inconsistent learning outcomes may be a result of the variability in the quality of mentors and the scope of the project in the industry. Williams and Hoole (2024) also include the fact that the potential of WIL to prepare graduates comprehensively may be disabled by the lack of host organisation readiness and institutional support in the context of developing countries. In India, problems are the unequal allocation of good internship hosts in metropolitan and Tier 2/3 cities, a lack of industry experience among the faculty, and the lack of standardised internship evaluation systems (AICTE, 2022).

2.5 Employer Participation and Co-Construction.

When employers are proactive in curriculum design, mentoring and assessment, successful WIL is most effective. Much of the recent graduate employability reform discourse is based on the Triple Helix model which encourages university-industry-government collaboration (Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff, 1995). As O'Regan et al. (2023) suggest, collaborative curriculum design between academics and employers enhances alignment between learning outcomes and job expectations. This triple model is directly

supported by NEP 2020 with its focus on industry-related programs, incubation centres and academic-industry chairs (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020).

Although many studies have been conducted to investigate the aspects of WIL through the lens of students and educators, there are few studies that have delved into the employer judgments of graduate preparedness following such experiences, especially in the Indian higher education system. This paper fills that gap.

2.6 Theoretical Framework

The two complementary theoretical frameworks underpin this study. To begin with, the Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) by Kolb is the pedagogical basis to comprehend how WIL mediates between abstract knowledge and practical application. Kolb (1984) is a conceptualisation of learning as a cyclic process consisting of Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualisation and Active Experimentation. This cycle is operationalised through industry-integrated programs that place students in actual work settings, which puts all four modes of learning into naturalistic settings.

Second, the structural conditions to effective WIL are framed through the Triple Helix Model of Innovation (Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff, 1995). This paradigm makes universities, industries, and government co-producers of knowledge and skill eco-systems. The Triple Helix lens, as used in the context of this research, can be used to explain why the employer-active role in designing curriculum, mentoring, and assessing the program, but not the industry playing a passive role, is the key to attaining the employability goals of WIL programs. In combination, these frameworks inform the understanding of the perceptions of employers and the development of recommendations to reform the institutions.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The current paper will use a qualitative research methodology to obtain a detailed perspective of the perception of industry professionals on the readiness and performance of graduates who went through industry-based higher education programs. With the nature of the research being exploratory and the desire to gather rich and contextual data, a qualitative methodology is best suited. It is not about measuring variables or testing hypotheses but about getting a clear understanding of subjective experiences, expectations and evaluations of employers.

The main data collection method was the use of semi-structured interviews. This was used because it gave the participants the freedom to elaborate their opinions and also provide uniformity between interviews as a result of the structured questionnaire. They were purposively sampled to include industry-related professionals in diverse industries such as technology, finance, consulting, manufacturing, and healthcare who have had direct supervisory or employment experience with graduates of industry-integrated programs. The selection requirements were a minimum of three years of experience in a managerial or HR position, and direct involvement with graduate recruitment or assessment.

The number of participants is 15. The 13th interview achieved data saturation, and two more interviews were carried out to verify the saturation, which guaranteed the condition of reliability and richness of insights. The anonymised profile of the participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Code	Sector	Role	Experience	Program Type	Interview Mode
P1	Information Technology	HR Manager	8 years	Internship Capstone ⁺	Video Call
P2	Logistics	HR Manager	6 years	Co-op Program	In-Person
P3	Consulting	Partner	12 years	Live Projects	In-Person
P4	Finance	Dept. Head	9 years	Internship	Video Call
P5	IT / ERP	Team Lead	5 years	Capstone Internship ⁺	Video Call
P6	Manufacturing	Plant Manager	14 years	Apprenticeship	In-Person
P7	Technology	Agile Manager	7 years	Co-op Program	Video Call
P8	Healthcare	Operations Head	11 years	Industry Mentorship	In-Person
P9	Consulting	Senior Associate	4 years	Live Projects	Video Call
P10	Finance	Risk Analyst Lead	6 years	Internship Capstone ⁺	Video Call
P11	Financial Services	Data Analytics Lead	8 years	Internship	In-Person
P12	IT / Software	Project Manager	5 years	Co-op Program	Video Call
P13	Hospitality / Mfg.	HR Professional	7 years	Internship	In-Person
P14	Healthcare	Clinical Manager	10 years	Live Projects	Video Call
P15	Manufacturing	Operations Lead	9 years	Apprenticeship	In-Person

Face-to-face and video conferencing interviews were used, depending on the availability of the participants. Each interview was about 45-60 minutes long and was recorded on audio with the participants giving their consent. The tapes were transcribed word-to-word and all information was anonymised to keep confidentiality and ethical research practices. Data collection was done after receiving ethical approval by the review board of the institution.

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data based on the six phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which included (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes and (6) producing the report. This approach helped to identify some common patterns, shared perceptions and meanings underlying the data. NVivo software was applied to help to code and systematise themes.

4. RESULTS

The thematic analysis of the 15 semi-structured interviews resulted in five key themes. The themes and their main findings as well as literature are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Summary of Emerging Themes

Theme	Key Finding	Literature Support
Practical Skill Preparedness	Faster onboarding; tool familiarity (ERP, CRM)	Mandal & Edwards (2022); Aprile & Knight (2020)
Communication & Soft Skills	Better articulation, teamwork, professional etiquette	Richardt et al. (2024); O'Regan et al. (2023)
Adaptability & Problem-Solving	Resilience in ambiguous, fast-paced settings	Aprile & Knight (2020); Durham et al. (2020)
Gaps in Program Execution	Inconsistent quality; tick-box internships	Richardt et al. (2024); Williams & Hoole (2024)
Desire for Deeper Collaboration	Co-curriculum design; faculty-industry synergy	O'Regan et al. (2023); Triple Helix Model

4.1 Theme 1: Preparedness of Practical Skills.

One prevailing theme in interviews was that industry-integrated programs provided the graduates with a better practical skillset. Employers often stressed that these graduates had a practical understanding of industry tools, software domain-specific, and technical processes. The respondents observed that students who had done internships or capstone projects were better equipped to cope with the demands of the real world without having to undergo a long period of training.

"Learners who had previously encountered ERP and CRM tools when joining us were able to get off to a running start when they joined us, we hardly had to teach them the ropes. It is night and day when compared with fresh graduates of straight programs."

An integrated program graduate might be able to interpret a complex piece of data and perform the first pivot analysis with independence in the first week of his/her time there. That autonomy previously required three months.

In general, the industry practitioners concurred that practical exposure minimized the disparity between learning and performance in the workplace to a great extent.

4.2 Theme 2: Communication and Soft Skills Proficiency

The second theme that was of importance was the role of communication and soft skills where graduates of industry integrated programs seemed to have a tangible advantage. The employers had also continuously cited that such graduates were more articulate, team players, and professional etiquette, mostly in the client facing or cross-functional jobs.

A different type of confidence was evident among students who had gained client presentation experience through their academic years - they were able to enter a boardroom and express ideas effectively, it was not taught in textbooks.

Professional emails, engaging in formal conversations, and feedback management - these are good signs of workplace preparedness, and these are things that our WIL graduates exhibited on the first day.

4.3 Theme 3: Adaptability and Problem-Solving Ability

The third and most appreciated quality in graduates was flexibility, especially in a hectic and confusing work environment. Those who were coming out of industry-integrated programs were more resilient and solution-based according to industry professionals in situations where they had to deal with unfamiliar or high-pressure situations.

P7, Agile Manager, Technology: "Students with multidisciplinary co-op programs quickly adjusted themselves to our sprint cycles. They had not been confused by ambiguity before.

One integrated program graduate solved a client dispute on their own and professionally in the first month - we do not even anticipate that of a staff member with less than two years experience.

4.4 Theme 4: Gaps in Program Implementation.

Although the general view of industry-integrated programs was good, some of the participants raised concerns on the issue of inconsistency in program implementation. Not every internship or project was considered as equally valuable and some graduates came in with superficial as well as non-substantial exposure to the industry.

Some of these internships are simply a check-box activity. Students sit in a corner and do data entry in six weeks and returns calling it industry experience. That does not train anyone on the actual job.

The best graduates I have hired were in a school where teachers were required to go to the shop floor and see what we do. In the schools where that was not the case, the students report to work without sufficient preparation, even after having done internships.

These issues indicate that standardised guidelines are required, institutional control, and closer collaborations between academia and industry to guarantee quality WIL experiences.

4.5 Theme 5: Wish to have Closer Collaboration between Industry and Academia.

One last theme was an increasing employer demand to participate more actively in the development of higher education programs and evaluation.

It is not a luxury to get industry professionals involved in syllabus design, but a necessity. How do you know what you are teaching is what we actually require on the job? — P2, HR Manager, Logistics.

"I would be happy to mentor students in their final year projects, but there is no formal system to do so. The invitation is not offered. In case universities erected that bridge, both sides would gain tremendously.

5. DISCUSSION

Results of this research support and elaborate on existing research on the importance of WIL besides emerging context-specific insights of the Indian higher education landscape. The combination of the five themes portrays a subtle story of employers: industry-integrated programs can provide quantifiable benefits in technical preparedness, professional behaviors, and adaptability skill, albeit with varying effects depending on the quality of implementation as well as the breadth of the institutional partnerships. The practical skill preparedness finding echoes the works of Mandal and Edwards (2022) who showed that WIL placements produced better technical and teamwork skills of Australian engineering graduates. Likewise, the communication skills that are evident among Indian WIL graduates are also similar to those of O'Regan et al. (2023) in Ireland where co-designed employer courses resulted in more of the WIL graduates being preferred in job situations. This inter-country similarity reinforces the generalisability of the soft-skills advantages of WIL.

Nonetheless, the issue of program implementation gaps presents a critical qualifier that is not prominently present in most of the positive WIL literature. Richardt et al. (2024) and Williams and Hoole (2024) have also reported inconsistent mentor quality and depth of projects as a cause of inconsistent outcomes. The Indian context further magnifies this challenge because structural inequalities (the concentration of quality internship hosts in metropolitan areas, the lack of institutional monitoring mechanisms) places many students, especially in Tier 2 and 3 college in the cities, in what is nominally yet substantively empty industry exposure.

The idea of industry-academia partnership relates directly to the Triple Helix model, which assumes that the role of universities, industries and governments is best played as co-creators as opposed to acting autonomously (Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff, 1995). In this study, employers were willing to co-design curricula and mentor students, although they cited structural barriers as the absence of formal invitations, no credit-bearing mentorship systems, and time constraints. The policy framework of this partnership is presented in India NEP 2020, yet the institutional level is immature and fragmented.

Through the prism of the Experiential Learning Theory (1984) by Kolb, the data indicate that the majority of the WIL programs in this research were able to support the Concrete Experience and Active Experimentation phases of the learning process, but were not able to support the Reflective Observation and Abstract Conceptualisation phases of the learning process, which generate transferable and higher-order learning. This observation suggests that to realize the full potential of WIL programs, the structured reflection mechanisms (journals, debriefs, faculty-industry review sessions) need to be integrated into the WIL programs.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations on the strategic level to be offered to educational institutions, industry partners, and policymakers based on the thematic analysis are as follows:

6.1 For Educational Institutions

- Integrate experiential learning as an essential and mandatory part of the curriculum - not an enrichment course. The student is expected to do a formal internship lasting 8-12 weeks with academic evaluation elements including reflective journals and project reports.
- Establish Industry Program Advisory Committees with professionals, alumni and faculty who will meet at least twice a year to discuss course content, assessment rubrics, and new skill needs.
- Introduce faculty immersion initiatives so that teaching faculty stay up to date with industry knowledge so they can be more relevant in mentoring and curriculum development.
- Integrate the development of soft-skills by providing special interactive courses on business communication, negotiation, conflict resolution and cultural intelligence - through simulations, role plays and feedback by industry mentors.
- Build sound monitoring and evaluation systems on internship quality: background check internship providers, demand frequent student progress reports and have structured exit interviews to ensure effective learning exposure.

6.2 For Industry Partners

- Move passive internship hosts into active co-educators: help establish project scopes with faculty, mentor students through structured mentoring during engagements, and participate in assessment.
- Encourage innovation challenges, case-based learning, and industry-led workshops in academic institutions to enhance experiential aspects.
- Serve as a member of academic boards and curriculum review panels to keep the program aligned to the needs of the sector and new skills requirements.
- Publish anonymised graduate performance data to academic partners to allow curriculum refinement based on evidence and close feedback loop.

6.3 For Policymakers

- Require a certain percentage of credits of the course to be done by exposure to the industry or project-based learning in line with NEP 2020 and AICTE requirements.

- Introduce a national system of accreditation of internship providers to certify companies on the quality and relevance of learning opportunities to save students of poor placements.
- Direct government funding of hybrid forms of experiential learning such as virtual internships, cross-institutional project platforms, and interdisciplinary laboratories with faculty and industry professionals.
- Make NAAC and NBA accreditation processes require institutions to disclose the results of industry partnerships, i.e. placement rates, employer satisfaction ratings, and graduate employability rates.

7. LIMITATIONS AND SCOPE FOR FURTHER STUDIES.

Although this research is well-informed and presented in a contextually sound manner, it is prone to a number of limitations that need to be taken into account when explaining its results.

To begin with, the sample of 15 participants is adequate to reach thematic saturation in the qualitative inquiry, but it does not allow statistical generalisation. The results depict opinions of employers in particular industries (technology, finance, consulting, manufacturing, healthcare) and might not be representative of the entire diversity of Indian industry. Second, the research is located in one institutional setting (Arka Jain University), which can limit the extrapolation of the results to institutions that have different resource bases, geographic locations, or program designs. Third, the sample was self-selected using purposive sampling, which opens the possibility of self-selection bias - employers who signed up to take part might have a more positive or more negative attitude to WIL than the overall employer population.

Future studies ought to take into account: (1) quantitative or mixed-methods research on a large scale to determine the generalisability of these findings between Indian states and types of institutions; (2) longitudinal studies to determine the long-term effects of WIL on career trajectories; (3) comparative research with other Indian Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 institutions to determine the influence of resource availability on the effectiveness of the workforce.

8. CONCLUSION

In the fast changing knowledge economy today, the readiness of graduates to fit actual needs of the workplace is a burning issue of concern to both employers and educators as well as policymakers. The study involved the perception of industry professionals towards the preparedness and performance of graduates of industry-integrated higher education programs in India by conducting a qualitative thematic analysis of 15 expert interviews in a variety of industries.

The results show that when properly applied industry-based programs provide graduates that are more practically prepared, communicatively competent, and professionally resilient, than their traditionally educated counterparts. Nonetheless, the success of these programs strongly depends on the quality of implementation, the authenticity of the elements of the experience, and the extent of interaction between the academic institutions and the industry partners. Lack of consistency in the implementation of the programmes, where internships turn into a tick-box activity instead of being a transformative learning process, is a major impediment to the realisation of the full potential of WIL.

This paper is based on the Experiential Learning Theory of Kolb and Triple Helix model and asserts that in order to make WIL effective, structural adherence to internship requirements is not sufficient; rather, it must be intentionally designed, sustained institutionally and co-created between the university, industry

and the government. The NEP 2020 of India offers an encouraging policy basis to this change, but it requires a concerted effort at institutional and sectoral level.

This paper is not only an evidence base but also a call to action to all the stakeholders who are determined to ensure that they make higher learning truly responsive to the need and opportunity of the 21 st century workforce.

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