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Aligning Higher Education Competencies with Industry Evolution: A Study of Futuristic Skills in Tamil Nadu

Prof. M. Vasimalairaja[1], Mr. K. Maniraja[2]

[1]Professor & Principal Investigator, Department of Education, CDOE, Alagappa University, Karaikudi, Tamil Nadu, India.
[2]Project Assistant, Department of Education, CDOE, Alagappa University, Karaikudi, Tamil Nadu, India.

Abstract
This study explores the congruity between competencies of higher education students from Tamil Nadu and changing human capital requirements of the traditional sectors (Automobile, Textile, and Agriculture) and new-age sectors (Artificial Intelligence, Renewable Energy, and Robotics). With funding from the Chief Minister's Research Grant (CMRG), this study explores the effectiveness of state intervention measures like Naan Mudhalvan Scheme and factors that aggravate the skills gap from socioeconomic and geographic perspectives. A sequential explanatory mixed methods design was employed to conduct this study and quantitative data collected through stratified sampling method consisting of 1,200 higher education students from Tamil Nadu, in addition to qualitative data collected through focus groups and industry participants. Findings of this study present the unique "competency paradox," as even though there is an effective enhancement in digital literacy of students due to regional state intervention, there are critical deficiencies in terms of automation-related core competencies, problem-solving skills, and technical reasoning skills. There is a severe structural bottleneck for rural and first generation institutional students, mainly due to high certification costs.

Keywords: Higher Education, Skill Mapping, Industry 4.0, Traditional Industries, Competency Paradox, Tamil Nadu.

1. INTRODUCTION

The State of Tamil Nadu can be regarded as an important economic driver of the country because of its unique two-fold industrial economy. The state is characterized by a number of globally successful and highly developed traditional industrial clusters, such as the automobile manufacturing industry in Chennai, textiles in Coimbatore and Tiruppur, and leather industry in Vellore. The current study investigates an accompanying trend within the regional economy whereby there is an emphasis on high technology industries which require specialized expertise in the design of electric vehicles, Green Hydrogen, Generative AI, and automation using Industry 4.0 technologies. To ensure the continuity of this trend, there is a need for the development of a highly adaptive pool of graduates within the regional higher education institutions. As a solution to the accompanying macro-economic problem, the Government of Tamil Nadu has introduced various capacity building programs such as the 'Naan Mudhalvan' skill

development program. However, traditional academic curriculum and rapidly changing labor market demands limit graduate employability. This empirical study provides a preliminary diagnostic of the expected skills among higher education students in Tamil Nadu.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Evolution of Skill Requirements: Industry 4.0 vs. Traditional Core

Industry 4.0 has changed the engineering and art sciences models too. The benchmarks that have been created worldwide by the World Economic Forum prove that procedural and repetitive domain competencies are becoming irrelevant in the labor market compared to cognitive competencies, for example, complex problem solving and critical thinking. As for the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, its industry no longer can work under the traditional manufacturing model without making use of technology innovations. It means, for instance, that the automotive manufacturing hubs require the engineers to be proficient in classical mechanics as well as BMS and embedded software architecture.

2.2 Institutional Ecosystems and Policy Interventions in Tamil Nadu

Interventions on the state level have to be introduced in order to balance the issue of skills shortage and allocate structural capabilities in some regions. The concept of Naan Mudhalvan can be characterized as a centralized one, which aims at integrating all necessary technical components into the process of university education and creating unified mechanisms for skill development. According to research conducted in the framework of regional workforce planning, although centralized curricula enhance basic technological knowledge, their efficiency is hindered by local capabilities.

2.3 Systemic Inequities and the Digital Divide

Within educational research, sociological paradigms clearly show that location of geography (urban or rural) and generation of academic lineage (being first generation) influence the ability of learners to access technological resources for their studies. Higher education institutions (HEIs) located in rural areas face persistent challenges, like inadequate lab facilities, poor Internet connections, and lower recruitment on campuses by top companies.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The research will adopt a sequential explanatory mixed methods approach. This involves carrying out a thorough quantitative survey at the beginning in order to establish self-perceived competencies and structure barriers. The second phase will include focus group discussions among faculty members and professionals in the industry in order to make sense of the quantitative phase results.

3.2 Sampling Frame and Participants

Stratified random sampling technique was used for selecting the final year students enrolled in higher education institutes (N = 1,200) in Tamil Nadu. The sample was stratified on the basis of geographical, discipline and socio-economic characteristics to ensure macro level representation:

- **Geographical Stratification:**

40% from Urban Centers (Chennai, Coimbatore, Madurai)
35% from Semi-Urban/ Tier-2 Cities (Karaikudi, Salem, Vellore)
25% from Rural Areas.

- **Disciplinary Strata:**

45% Engineering and Technology

35% Arts and Science
20% Commerce and Management

- **Socioeconomic Variable:**

38% of the total sample

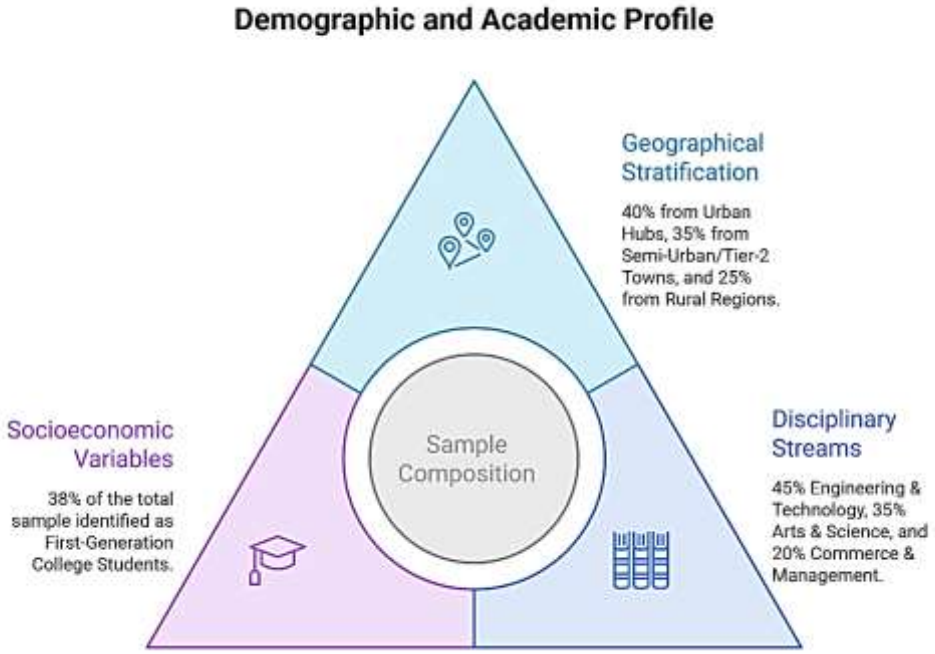

Figure 1. Sampling Frame and Participants

4. STATISTICAL HYPOTHESES AND EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

4.1 Geographical Variance in Skill Acquisition

- **Null Hypothesis (H_0):** There is no dependence of the availability of teaching in future skills on the geographical location of the institute.
- **Alternative Hypothesis (H_1):** There is significant dependence of the availability of teaching in future skills on the geographical location of the institute.

Table 1: Chi-Square Test Matrix (Geography vs. Skill Access)

Analytical Relationship	Chi-Square Value (x^2)	Degrees of Freedom (df)	Asymptotic Significance (p-value)	Empirical Decision
Institutional Location vs. Primary Source of Futuristic Skills	84.321	6	< 0.001	Reject H_0

Interpretation: The null hypothesis is rejected at the $p < 0.001$ level of significance, suggesting that the use of channels to acquire advanced skills is significantly affected by geographical location. Analysis through cross-tabulation shows that 68% of students from urban centers actually make use of special

workshops in institutions and also good commercial online portals. In comparison, over 55% of students from rural locations depend on regular college lectures and video tutorials.

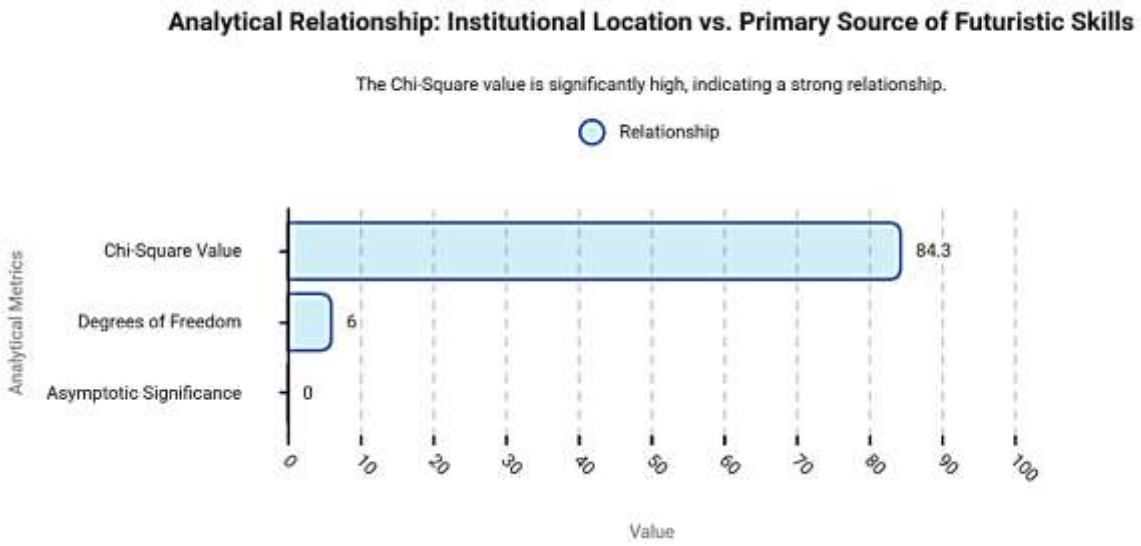

Figure 2. Analytical Relationship: Institutional Location vs. Primary Source of Futuristic Skills

4.2 The Digital Divide: Hardware Access as a Performance Predictor

- **Null Hypothesis (H_0):** There is no significant difference in the scores of digital literacy self-assessment between students with personal laptops and students using only mobile phones and college laboratory computers.
- **Alternative Hypothesis (H_1):** The students who have their own laptops exhibit significantly higher mean scores of digital literacy self-assessment.

Table 2: Independent Samples t-Test (Hardware Ownership vs. Digital Literacy)

Group Variable	Sample Size (N)	Mean Score (1.00 - 5.00)	t-value	Significance (2-tailed)
Laptop Owners	742	4.12	7.84	<0.001
Non-Owners (Mobile Only)	458	3.26		

Interpretation: According to the independent samples t-test results, there is a significant difference between the two groups ($t = 7.84$, $p < 0.001$). The large gap between those who own laptops ($M = 4.12$) and those who don't ($M = 3.26$) clearly shows that mobile phones and limited laboratory facilities cannot replace personal computers when acquiring advanced skills, like software programming.

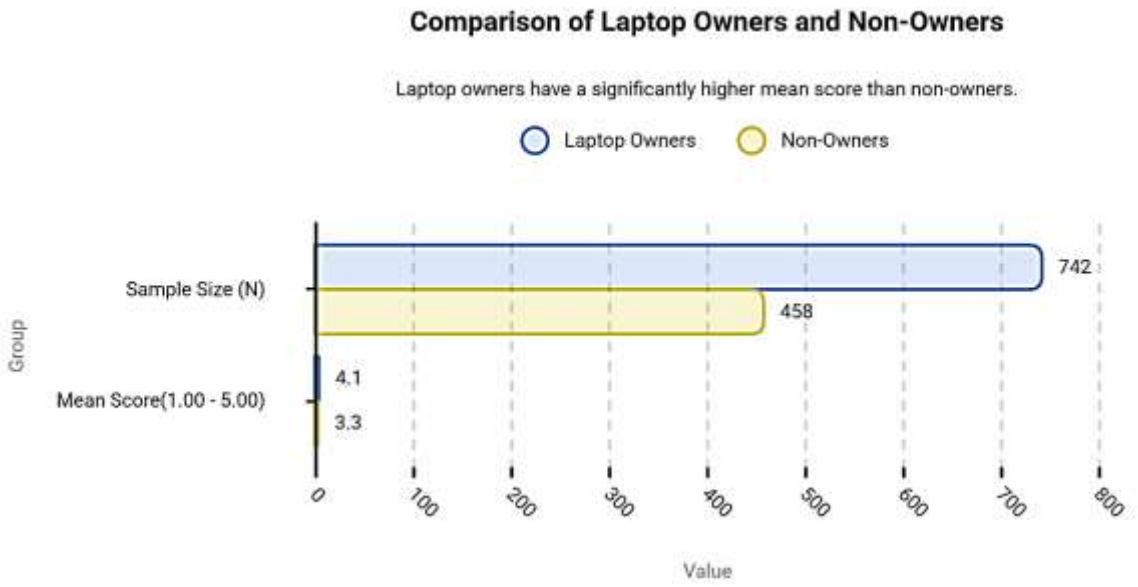

Figure 3. Comparison of Laptop Owners and Non-Owners

4.3 Socioeconomic Capital and Professional Confidence

- **Null Hypothesis (H_0):** No significant difference exists between the technical interview confidence of first-generation and non-first-generation college students.
- **Alternative Hypothesis (H_1):** The technical interview confidence is significantly greater for non-first-generation students.

Table 3: Independent Samples t-Test (Generational Academic Capital)

Group Variable	Sample Size (N)	Mean Score (1.00 - 5.00)	t-value	Significance (2-tailed)
First-Generation Students	456	2.89	-6.12	<0.001
Non-First-Generation Students	744	3.64		

Interpretation: A considerable shortage of confidence in professional life due to generation gap in education is reported ($t = -6.12$, $p < 0.001$). It can be concluded from the qualitative data that the majority of the first-generation students have lower levels of confidence due to a deficiency in contacts with professional relatives, business mentoring, and business English presentation experience.

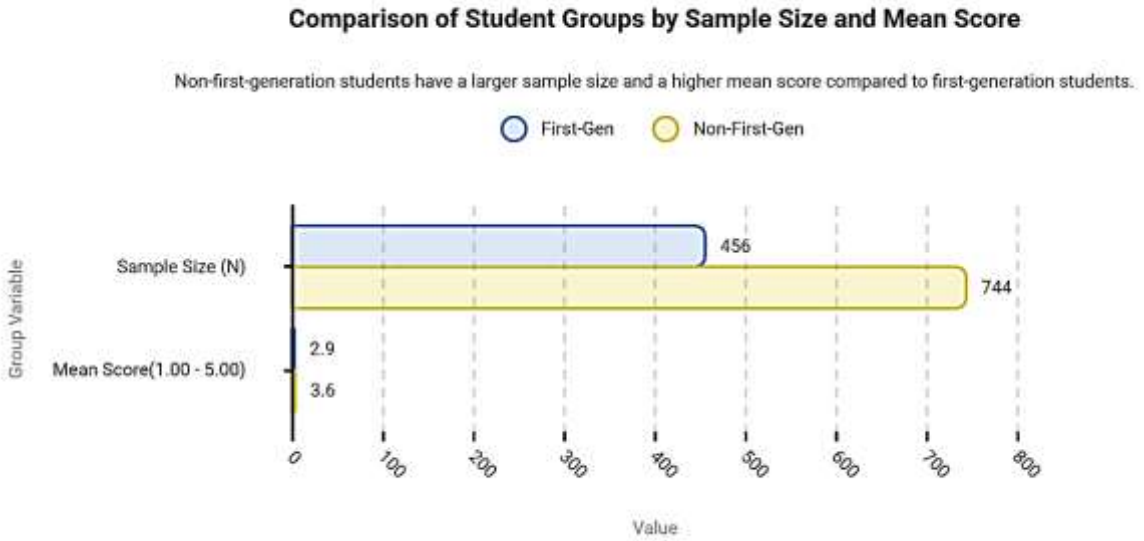

Figure 4. Comparison of Student Groups by Sample Size and Mean Score

4.4 Disciplinary Infrastructure Disparities

- **Null Hypothesis (H_0):** Perceived readiness of the institutional infrastructure is evenly spread across all disciplines.
- **Alternative Hypothesis (H_1):** Perceived readiness of the institutional infrastructure is significantly different among disciplines.

Table 4: One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) Table

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares (SS)	Degrees of Freedom (df)	Mean Square (MS)	F-statistic	Significance (p-value)
Between Groups	42.18	2	21.09	14.35	<0.001
Within Groups	1759.62	1197	1.47		
Total	1801.80	1199			

Interpretation: One-way ANOVA results show a very significant difference in the perception of infrastructure among disciplines ($F(2, 1197) = 14.35$, $p < 0.001$). According to the post-hoc test of Tukey HSD, there is a significant difference between E&T departments and Arts & Science departments with respect to the satisfaction of specialized lab arrangements and the availability of advanced software.

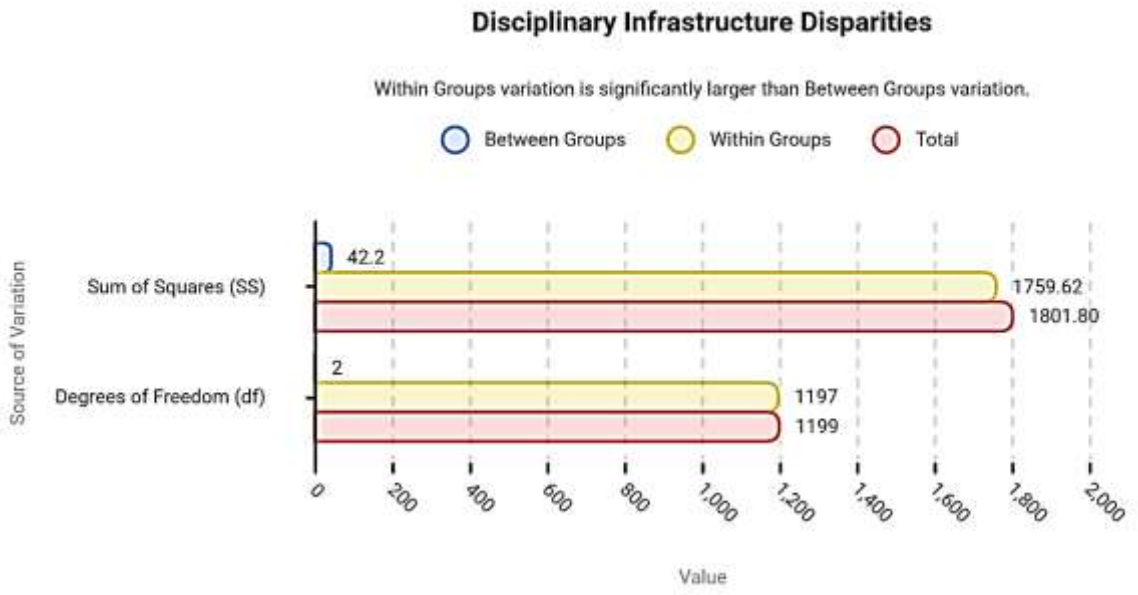

Figure 5. One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)

5. DESCRIPTIVE BASELINE SUMMARY OF STUDENT METRICS

5.1 Efficacy of the Naan Mudhalvan Scheme

- **Curricular Integration Rate:** 88% of students attending higher educational institutions affiliated with the state have reported integration of Naan Mudhalvan skill modules within the curriculum schedule.
- **Perceived Relevance Impact:** 42% of students have rated the curriculum modules as "Highly Relevant" for their career goals while 36% have rated them as "Moderately Relevant." On the other hand, 22% of students have expressed the need for customization of general platform modules.

5.2 Traditional Sector Career Alignment

- **Core Sector Employment Intent:** Sixty-eight percent of engineering and science students show clear interest in getting jobs in core sectors (such as automobiles or textiles), provided that these industries use high-tech frameworks based on automation.
- **Curricular Disconnection:** Just twenty-four percent of survey respondents find that the regular curriculum taught by their departments is appropriately linked to the needs of the core sectors located near their institutions.

5.3 Core Upskilling Barriers

- **Financial Bottlenecks:** 46% say the expensive costs of obtaining worldwide business certification (e.g., cloud computing, advanced data analytics) is the major obstacle to learning advanced skills.
- **Academic Workload Rigidity:** 31% of respondents argue that there is no sufficient time left from their academic schedule and examination period to learn about future professional courses.

6. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS AND STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

The solution for overcoming such deficiencies and making the student capabilities match the industrial aspirations of Tamil Nadu can be provided through the following multiple-level strategy:

1. **Regionally Oriented Curriculum Development:** Skills training must be oriented towards the specific strengths of the region. HEIs operating in the proximity of significant industrial zones (such

as Chennai or Coimbatore) should develop specialized courses related to EV design and industrial robotics. On the contrary, HEIs operating in agrarian/textile regions (such as Trichy, Tiruppur, and the southern regions of Tamil Nadu) should focus on smart agriculture, energy efficiency, and logistics.

2. **Hybrid Infrastructure Nodes:** To tackle the existing digital gap as revealed by empirical study, it is imperative for the government to provide computing facilities. The conversion of university and municipal libraries into digital centers with powerful software tools will allow students without personal laptops to have the same access to data literacy and programming tracks.
3. **Professional Training for Faculty Members and Industry Collaboration:** It is crucial for academic institutions to establish professional development paths through which faculty members can experience contemporary industries. Moreover, university curricula must be designed in collaboration with industries, in which industry professionals co-teach technical courses.
4. **Customized Mentoring Program for Vulnerable Groups:** In order to prepare first-generation and rural students for professional interviews, it is important for HEIs to have complete social support systems in place. This can be done by having a structured mentoring program in place, providing professional communication centres in placement departments, and making state-sponsored international certifications available to underprivileged students.

7. Conclusion

This paper describes the interrelation of graduate skills in the higher educational segments of Tamil Nadu and the changing technological demands of the labour market. Data show that even though the state-based policies like the Naan Mudhalvan Scheme have been able to develop the basic technical skills, the systematic gaps created by geographic location, availability of hardware, and socioeconomic capital of generations limit the readiness of the graduates. In order to increase the return on investment in the education system, there is a need to change from the existing theoretical approach to an empirical one.

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