

## Assessing Employability Skills of Management Students: Evidence from Private Universities in North India

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### ABSTRACT

The persistent gap between management education outcomes and industry expectations constitutes one of the most pressing structural challenges confronting Indian higher education. This study empirically assesses the employability skill profiles of management students enrolled in private universities across North India, examining six theoretically grounded skill dimensions: soft skills, verbal skills, cognitive skills, managerial skills, technical skills, and information and communication technology (ICT) skills. Adopting a concurrent mixed-methods research design, quantitative data were collected from 520 final-year MBA students across eight private universities spanning Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Uttarakhand, and Punjab, using a validated structured questionnaire. Complementary qualitative insights were gathered through 30 semi-structured interviews with faculty members and industry HR professionals. Six formal research hypotheses were posited and empirically tested. Descriptive statistics, reliability analysis (Cronbach's Alpha), Average Variance Extracted (AVE), Pearson correlation, and multiple regression analysis were employed for quantitative data, while Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis was applied to qualitative data. Results reveal that managerial skills (M = 3.71) and soft skills (M = 3.62) recorded the highest self-assessed means, whereas technical skills (M = 3.19) and ICT skills (M = 3.27) were critically underdeveloped relative to employer benchmarks derived from a parallel HR manager survey (N = 45). The regression model confirmed that the six-dimensional skill composite explains 68.4% of the variance in employability readiness ( $R^2 = 0.684$ , Adjusted  $R^2 = 0.677$ ,  $F(6, 513) = 112.84$ ,  $p < .001$ ), with all six hypotheses supported. Grounded in an integrated theoretical framework drawing on Human Capital Theory, the Technology Acceptance Model, Competency-Based Education, and Constructivism, the study proposes a Contextualised Employability Skill Model (CESM) as a novel contribution. Strategic recommendations encompass curriculum redesign incorporating digital tools, formalised industry-academia partnerships, and outcome-driven competency mapping aligned with regulatory frameworks...

**Keywords:** Employability skills, management education, private universities, North India, ICT skills, competency mapping, CESM, mixed methods, skill gap

### INTRODUCTION:

The global knowledge economy of the twenty-first century has repositioned graduate employability as a defining concern of higher education policy and practice worldwide. In India, management education has undergone remarkable quantitative expansion, with over 6,000 institutions currently offering MBA and allied programmes under the regulatory purview of AICTE. Yet this expansion has not been accompanied by commensurate improvement in graduate quality. Studies consistently indicate that fewer than 30% of management graduates are considered immediately deployable by industry, signalling a systemic misalignment between academic preparation and labour market requirements (Bhatnagar, 2021; Malhotra et al., 2022).

Private universities in North India, particularly those situated in Tier II and Tier III cities across Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Uttarakhand, and Punjab, constitute a significant and rapidly growing segment of the management education landscape. These institutions serve a

predominantly aspirational, first-generation learner population, yet frequently lack robust industry interfaces, contemporary digital infrastructure, and adaptive curricula (Gupta & Mahajan, 2023). The consequence is a cohort of graduates equipped with theoretical foundations but deficient in the practical, interpersonal, digital, and analytical competencies demanded by contemporary organisations (Chand et al., 2023).

Employability is a multi-dimensional construct. Hillage and Pollard (1998) defined it as the capability to gain initial employment, maintain it, and transition between roles within the labour market. More recent operationalisations extend this definition to encompass role performance effectiveness and career transition agility (Mahajan et al., 2022). This study focuses on six theoretically grounded skill dimensions- soft skills, verbal skills, cognitive skills, managerial skills, technical skills, and ICT skills as antecedents of employability readiness, drawing on evidence from both student self-assessments and employer-benchmarked expectations.

Despite a growing body of research on graduate employability in India, significant empirical gaps persist. First, most extant Indian studies concentrate on engineering or general undergraduate populations; management graduates in private institutions remain comparatively understudied (Bala & Singh, 2020; Hulage & Gethe, 2020). Second, the majority of studies rely on a single data source, either employer perceptions or student self-reports, rather than triangulated, multi-source evidence. Third, no prior study has proposed an integrated, contextually validated employability model applicable to the specific institutional ecology of Tier II and Tier III private universities in semi-urban North India that simultaneously tests multiple skill dimensions as predictors of employability readiness and incorporates employer-defined benchmarks as comparative anchors. The present study addresses each of these gaps through a concurrent mixed-methods design, formal hypothesis testing, and the proposal of the Contextualised Employability Skill Model (CESM).

## 2. Review of Literature

A substantial and growing body of scholarship has examined the employability skills gap among management graduates globally and within the Indian context. The following thematic synthesis integrates contributions from the past eight years across the key constructs of this study.

### 2.1 Employability Skills: Conceptual and Empirical Landscape

Employability skills are broadly defined as the transferable competencies that enable graduates to secure, retain, and progress within employment (Hillage & Pollard, 1998; McGunagle & Zizka, 2020). Fajaryati et al. (2020) conducted a systematic literature review identifying communication, critical thinking, problem-solving, and digital literacy as universally prioritised employability competencies across multiple industries. Garcia-Alvarez et al. (2022), in a systematic review of employer perspectives across European contexts, confirmed transversal competencies including teamwork, adaptability, and communication as consistently demanded across sectors. In the Indian context, Bhatnagar (2021) reviewed the employability and skill gap literature for MBA graduates, identifying curricula irrelevance, inadequate industry exposure, and poor communication proficiency as the principal barriers to employability. Malhotra et al. (2022) examined employability of graduates in the retail industry across selected North Indian states, finding significant deficits in customer-orientation skills, digital tools proficiency, and professional communication.

### 2.2 Soft Skills and Verbal Communication

Soft skills have emerged as a pivotal determinant of management graduate employability across multiple studies. Holik et al. (2023), in a survey of 208 engineering and management students, identified problem-solving, resilience, communication, and reliability as crucial competencies, while revealing self-assessment gaps in self-confidence and communication proficiency. Johnson

et al. (2023) categorised essential career readiness skills for marketing graduates, finding that both soft and hard skills are regarded as equally important by employers, underscoring the need for integrative course design. Lekshmy et al. (2025) demonstrated that emotional intelligence components- self-awareness, self-regulation, and empathy substantially enhance workplace communication and conflict resolution, with direct implications for management graduate employability. Parihar et al. (2024) confirmed that soft skills training significantly improves the employability outcomes of technical graduates in Indian institutions. Holidi and Seman (2023), examining employers' and youths' perspectives on employability skills, found that communication and interpersonal skills ranked highest in employer demand, followed by problem-solving and digital competency.

### 2.3 Cognitive and Managerial Skills

Cognitive and managerial skill dimensions have received sustained attention in the graduate employability literature. Rajathi and Rohit (2023) conducted a study on competency mapping of management students, identifying decision-making, strategic thinking, teamwork, and adaptability as the most critical managerial competencies for employability. Al Hinai et al. (2021), examining management graduates in Oman, found that cognitive readiness and social capital attributes significantly predicted employability outcomes in higher education contexts. Kaushal and Vaghela (2023), in an Indian study tracking changes in employer demands for management and engineering graduates, documented a marked shift towards analytical reasoning, problem-based learning, and cognitive agility post-COVID-19. Raman and Pramod (2021) employed predictive analytics to model the employability of management graduates, identifying managerial competencies particularly leadership and project management as the strongest predictors of placement outcomes.

### 2.4 Technical and ICT Skills

The growing integration of technology into business functions has elevated the importance of technical and ICT skills for management graduates. Kalla (2023) investigated the role of ICT in skill development among management students, finding that proficiency in digital tools, learning management systems, and enterprise resource planning platforms significantly contributes to entrepreneurial and communication skill development. Kaushal and Vaghela (2023) identified a notable post-pandemic shift in employer expectations, with digital skills and data literacy emerging as essential requirements for fresh management hires. Das and Reddy (2024), in an empirical study of employability trends, documented a technological transformation in skill requirements, with graduates deficient in data analytics, digital communication, and software-based financial modelling facing significant hiring disadvantages. Elamadurthi et al. (2023) further demonstrated that ICT integration in higher education management leads to measurable improvements in institutional efficiency and graduate readiness. Hemanth and Renapurkar (2022) argued for the inclusion of technical skills as formal curriculum subjects

for management students, citing persistent employer dissatisfaction with graduates' practical technology capabilities.

## 2.5 Industry-Academia Collaboration and the North Indian Context

The role of industry-academia linkages in bridging the employability gap has been extensively documented. Chand et al. (2023) gathered employer perspectives on the employability skills of Indian management graduates and found that recruiters most valued communication, problem-solving, and Industry 4.0 readiness, while flagging weak industry exposure as the principal institutional deficiency. Gupta and Mahajan (2023) investigated stakeholder perceptions of graduate employability across Indian institutions, documenting significant disconnects between faculty assessments of graduate preparedness and employer expectations, particularly for analytical and digital competencies. Mahajan et al. (2022) proposed a tripartite employability skills framework integrating student, faculty, and employer perspectives, finding that alignment across all three stakeholder groups was associated with significantly superior placement outcomes. Malhotra et al. (2022) specifically examined North Indian retail industry employers' perspectives, documenting region-specific skill gaps that are not captured by aggregated national studies. Bala and Singh (2020) examined bankers' viewpoints on management student employability, revealing that interpersonal skills and banking-domain technical knowledge were both significantly deficient among North Indian management graduates.

## 2.6 Research Gap

The foregoing review identifies three clear lacunae in the existing literature. First, empirical studies focusing specifically on the six-dimensional employability skill profile of management students within the private university sector in North India remain scarce; most Indian studies aggregate public and private institutions or focus on metropolitan or engineering contexts (Bhatnagar, 2021; Malhotra et al., 2022). Second, mixed-methods designs that triangulate student self-assessments with employer-rated benchmarks and faculty qualitative accounts are rare; the majority of extant studies rely on a single data source. Third, no prior study has proposed an integrated, contextually anchored model applicable to the specific institutional ecology of Tier II and Tier III private universities that simultaneously tests multiple skill dimensions as predictors of employability readiness while incorporating employer-defined benchmarks as comparative anchors. The present study is designed to address each of these gaps.

## 3. Theoretical Framework and Research Hypotheses

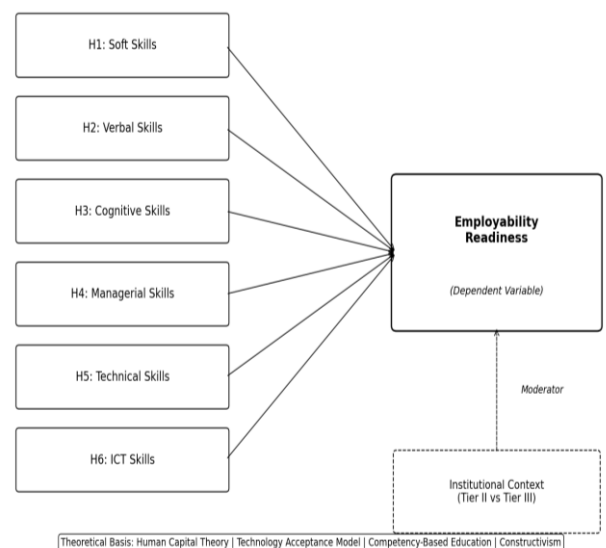
### 3.1 Theoretical Foundations

The conceptual architecture of this study rests on an integrated framework drawing upon four established bodies of theory. Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964) posits that investment in education and training enhances individual productivity and market value, providing the foundational rationale for examining skill dimensions as predictors of employability readiness. The Technology

Acceptance Model (TAM; Davis, 1989) has been extended to educational contexts to explain the adoption and development of ICT skills among students (Kalla, 2023), informing this study's specific attention to technical and ICT skill dimensions. Competency-Based Education (CBE) provides a practical framework for designing curricula aligned with explicit employer expectations, shifting focus from content coverage to demonstrated competency outcomes (Garcia-Alvarez et al., 2022). Constructivist Learning Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) emphasises active, experience-based knowledge construction through social interaction, providing the theoretical rationale for qualitative themes around experiential learning deficits.

### 3.2 The Contextualised Employability Skill Model (CESM)

Drawing on the above theoretical pillars, this study proposes the Contextualised Employability Skill Model (CESM) as its primary theoretical contribution. CESM positions six skill dimensions — soft skills, verbal skills, cognitive skills, managerial skills, technical skills, and ICT skills as theoretically grounded, empirically measurable antecedents of employability readiness. Critically, CESM incorporates employer-defined benchmarks as external reference points, enabling a skill gap analysis that goes beyond self-reported student assessments. The model further recognises institutional context — specifically the Tier II and Tier III private university ecology of North India as a moderating factor shaping the magnitude of skill gaps. CESM is distinguished from prior generic employability frameworks by its dual data-source architecture (student self-assessment + employer benchmark) and its explicit contextual anchoring within the private management education sector.



**Figure 1: Contextualised Employability Skill Model (CESM)**

### 3.3 Research Hypotheses

Based on the CESM and the theoretical review, the following six directional hypotheses are formally posited:

**H1:** Soft skills are significantly and positively associated with employability readiness among management students in private universities in North India.

**H2:** Verbal skills are significantly and positively associated with employability readiness among management students in private universities in North India.

**H3:** Cognitive skills are significantly and positively associated with employability readiness among management students in private universities in North India.

**H4:** Managerial skills are significantly and positively associated with employability readiness among management students in private universities in North India.

**H5:** Technical skills are significantly and positively associated with employability readiness among

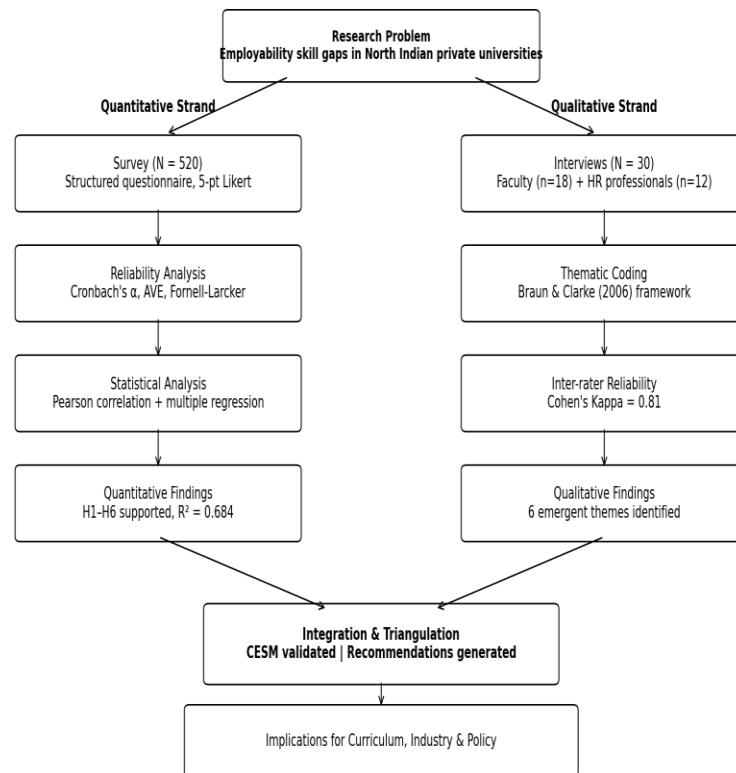
management students in private universities in North India.

**H6:** ICT skills are significantly and positively associated with employability readiness among management students in private universities in North India.

#### 4. Research Methodology

##### 4.1 Research Design

This study employs a concurrent mixed-methods research design, integrating quantitative survey data with qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews. The concurrent design enables simultaneous data collection from both strands, with quantitative findings providing statistical generalisability and qualitative data offering contextual depth (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Figure 2 presents the complete research design flow.



**Figure 2: Concurrent Mixed-Methods Research Design Flow**

##### 4.2 Population and Sample

The target population comprised all final-year MBA students enrolled in AICTE-approved private universities in four North Indian states: Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Uttarakhand, and Punjab. A multi-stage stratified sampling technique was employed. In Stage 1, eight private universities were purposively selected to ensure geographic diversity and variation in institutional tier (five Tier II city institutions; three Tier III city institutions). In Stage 2, proportional random sampling was applied within each institution. Of 620 questionnaires distributed, 540 were returned and 520 were deemed complete and valid, yielding a response rate of 83.9%. This sample size exceeds the recommended minimum of 10 observations per predictor for six-predictor regression

models (Hair et al., 2019). Additionally, 30 semi-structured interviews comprising 18 faculty members and 12 industry HR professionals were conducted for qualitative triangulation.

##### 4.3 Employer Benchmark Data

A methodological innovation distinguishing this study is the parallel collection of employer-defined skill benchmark scores. A structured benchmark survey was administered to 45 HR managers and senior recruiters across eight industries regularly recruiting from the target universities including banking and financial services, IT-enabled services, FMCG, manufacturing, consulting, education, healthcare administration, and retail management. Respondents rated expected fresh MBA hire

proficiency on each of the six skill dimensions using the same 5-point Likert scale as the student questionnaire. Mean employer benchmark scores were then used to compute the skill gap index ( $\Delta = \text{Employer Benchmark} - \text{Student Self-Score}$ ) reported in Section 5.3.

#### 4.4 Instrument Design and Validity

The primary quantitative instrument comprised four sections: respondent profile, six employability skill dimension scales (5-point Likert), employability readiness indicators, and institutional context items. Scale items were adapted from validated instruments used in prior studies (Holik et al., 2023; Johnson et al., 2023; Rajathi & Rohit, 2023) and refined through expert review by five academics and three industry practitioners, followed by a pilot test with 40 students. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha (Nunnally, 1978), with all coefficients exceeding 0.80. Convergent validity was assessed via Average Variance

Extracted ( $AVE > 0.50$ ; Hair et al., 2019) and discriminant validity through the Fornell-Larcker criterion.

#### 4.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics 26.0 and AMOS 26.0. Qualitative interview data were subjected to manual thematic coding following the six-phase framework of Braun and Clarke (2006), with two independent coders achieving an inter-rater reliability of Cohen's Kappa = 0.81, indicating strong agreement.

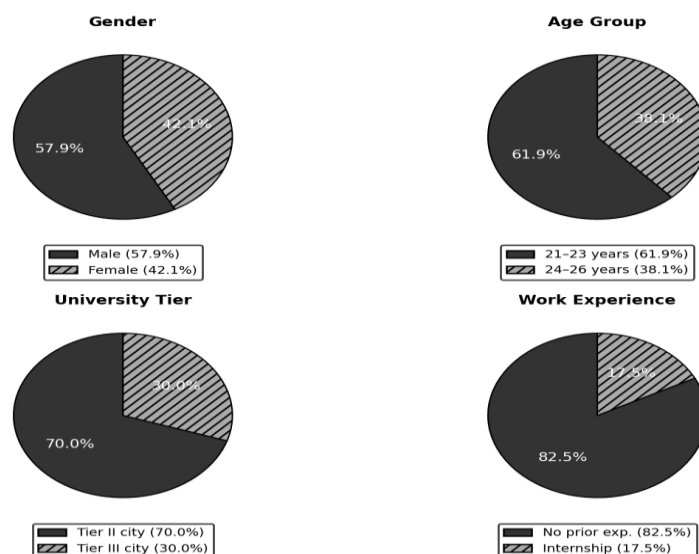
### 5. Results and Analysis

#### 5.1 Respondent Profile

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the 520 respondents. The sample comprised predominantly male students (57.9%) in the 21–23 age group (61.9%), drawn primarily from Tier II city institutions (70.0%), with the majority reporting no prior work experience (82.5%).

**Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 520)**

| Variable        | Category               | Frequency (%) |
|-----------------|------------------------|---------------|
| Gender          | Male                   | 301 (57.9%)   |
|                 | Female                 | 219 (42.1%)   |
| Age Group       | 21–23 years            | 322 (61.9%)   |
|                 | 24–26 years            | 198 (38.1%)   |
| University Tier | Tier II city           | 364 (70.0%)   |
|                 | Tier III city          | 156 (30.0%)   |
| Work Experience | No prior experience    | 429 (82.5%)   |
|                 | Part-time / Internship | 91 (17.5%)    |



**Figure 3: Demographic Profile of Respondents — Graphical Summary (N = 520)**

### 5.2 Descriptive Statistics and Reliability

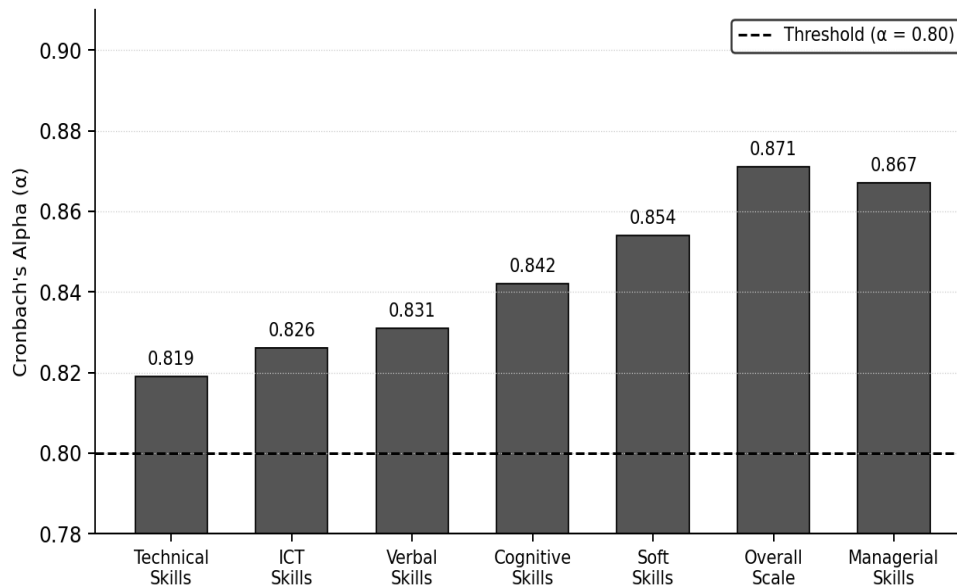
Table 2 presents descriptive statistics and reliability coefficients. Managerial skills recorded the highest student self-assessed mean ( $M = 3.71$ ,  $SD = 0.588$ ), followed by soft skills ( $M = 3.62$ ,  $SD = 0.621$ ). Technical skills ( $M = 3.19$ ,  $SD = 0.782$ ) and ICT skills ( $M = 3.27$ ,

$SD = 0.751$ ) recorded the lowest means, indicating that technology-oriented competencies are the most underdeveloped among respondents (Kaushal & Vaghela, 2023; Das & Reddy, 2024). All Cronbach's Alpha values exceed 0.80, and all AVE values exceed 0.50, confirming strong internal consistency and convergent validity (Hair et al., 2019).

**Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Employability Skill Dimensions (N = 520)**

| Skill Dimension                     | Mean        | SD           | Cronbach's $\alpha$ | AVE         |
|-------------------------------------|-------------|--------------|---------------------|-------------|
| Soft Skills                         | 3.62        | 0.621        | 0.854               | 0.53        |
| Verbal Skills                       | 3.45        | 0.693        | 0.831               | 0.51        |
| Cognitive Skills                    | 3.38        | 0.714        | 0.842               | 0.52        |
| Managerial Skills                   | 3.71        | 0.588        | 0.867               | 0.56        |
| Technical Skills                    | 3.19        | 0.782        | 0.819               | 0.50        |
| ICT Skills                          | 3.27        | 0.751        | 0.826               | 0.51        |
| <b>Employability Readiness (DV)</b> | <b>3.48</b> | <b>0.644</b> | <b>0.871</b>        | <b>0.54</b> |

Note. *SD* = Standard Deviation; *AVE* = Average Variance Extracted. All Cronbach's  $\alpha > 0.80$  and *AVE*  $> 0.50$  confirm reliability and convergent validity.



**Figure 4: Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Coefficients by Skill Dimension**

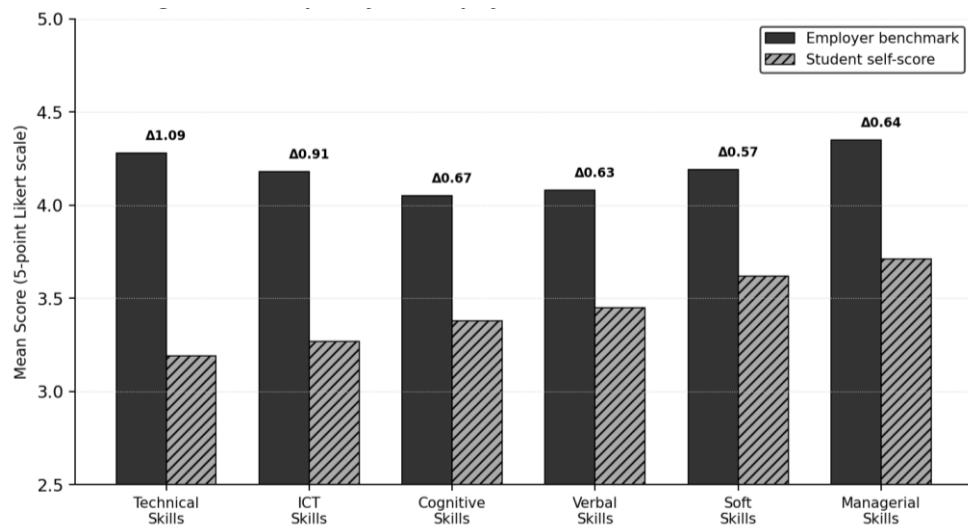
### 5.3 Skill Gap Analysis

Table 3 presents the skill gap index, computed as the difference between employer-benchmarked expected scores and student self-assessed means. The gap is most pronounced for Technical Skills ( $\Delta 1.09$ ) and ICT Skills ( $\Delta 0.91$ ), consistent with documented industry concerns about the digital unpreparedness of Indian management graduates (Kalla, 2023; Elamadurthi et al., 2023). Managerial Skills records the smallest gap ( $\Delta 0.64$ ); however, the employer benchmark for this dimension is also the highest ( $M = 4.35$ ), indicating that even the strongest student dimension falls measurably short of industry expectations.

**Table 3: Skill Gap Index — Employer Benchmark vs Student Self-Assessment**

| Skill Dimension   | Employer Benchmark (M) | Student Self-Score (M) | Gap ( $\Delta$ ) | Rank |
|-------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------|------|
| Technical Skills  | 4.28                   | 3.19                   | 1.09             | 1    |
| ICT Skills        | 4.18                   | 3.27                   | 0.91             | 2    |
| Cognitive Skills  | 4.05                   | 3.38                   | 0.67             | 3    |
| Managerial Skills | 4.35                   | 3.71                   | 0.64             | 4    |
| Verbal Skills     | 4.08                   | 3.45                   | 0.63             | 5    |
| Soft Skills       | 4.19                   | 3.62                   | 0.57             | 6    |

Note. Employer benchmark scores are mean ratings from the HR manager survey (N = 45). Gap ( $\Delta$ ) = Employer Benchmark – Student Self-Score. Rank 1 = largest gap.



**Figure 5: Skill Gap Analysis — Employer Benchmark vs Student Self-Assessment**

#### 5.4 Correlation Analysis

Table 4 presents the Pearson correlation matrix. All six skill dimensions exhibit statistically significant positive correlations with each other at the 0.01 level. The strongest inter-dimension correlation is between Technical Skills and ICT Skills ( $r = .601$ ), reflecting their developmental proximity and suggesting that integrated technology-focused curricula would be more efficacious than standalone electives. Managerial Skills demonstrates robust correlations across all dimensions (range: .468–.558), underscoring its centrality within the CESM. These results are consistent with Raman and Pramod (2021), who identified the interconnected nature of managerial and analytical competencies in predicting graduate employability.

**Table 4: Pearson Correlation Matrix – Skill Dimensions**

| Variable               | SS     | VS     | CS     | MS     | TS     | ICT    |
|------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Soft Skills (SS)       | 1.000  | .512** | .489** | .558** | .431** | .403** |
| Verbal Skills (VS)     | .512** | 1.000  | .467** | .529** | .412** | .388** |
| Cognitive Skills (CS)  | .489** | .467** | 1.000  | .541** | .474** | .445** |
| Managerial Skills (MS) | .558** | .529** | .541** | 1.000  | .496** | .468** |

|                       |        |        |        |        |        |        |
|-----------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Technical Skills (TS) | .431** | .412** | .474** | .496** | 1.000  | .601** |
| ICT Skills (ICT)      | .403** | .388** | .445** | .468** | .601** | 1.000  |

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). N = 520.

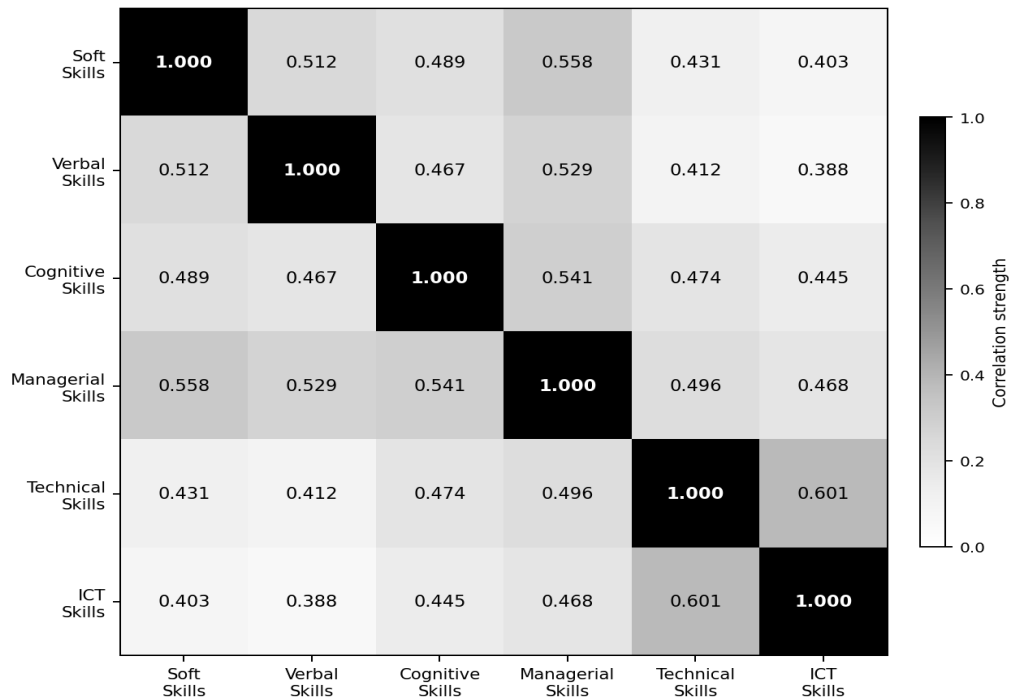


Figure 6: Pearson Correlation Heatmap — Skill Dimensions (darker = stronger correlation)

### 5.5 Multiple Regression Analysis

Table 5 presents the multiple regression results predicting employability readiness from the six skill dimensions. The model is statistically significant ( $F(6, 513) = 112.84, p < .001$ ) and explains 68.4% of the variance in employability readiness ( $R^2 = 0.684, \text{Adjusted } R^2 = 0.677$ ). Managerial skills emerged as the strongest predictor ( $\beta = .243, p < .001$ ), followed by soft skills ( $\beta = .218, p < .001$ ), cognitive skills ( $\beta = .171, p < .01$ ), and verbal skills ( $\beta = .164, p < .01$ ). Technical skills ( $\beta = .139, p < .05$ ) and ICT skills ( $\beta = .146, p < .01$ ), while statistically significant, recorded the lowest beta coefficients, corroborating the descriptive finding that these dimensions are the least developed. Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values ranged from 1.74 to 2.18, confirming the absence of multicollinearity. All six hypotheses (H1 through H6) are supported.

Table 5: Multiple Regression Results – Predictors of Employability Readiness

| Predictor         | $\beta$ | SE    | t     | Sig.    | VIF  | Decision     |
|-------------------|---------|-------|-------|---------|------|--------------|
| Soft Skills       | .218    | 0.049 | 4.449 | .000*** | 1.86 | H1 Supported |
| Verbal Skills     | .164    | 0.051 | 3.216 | .002**  | 1.74 | H2 Supported |
| Cognitive Skills  | .171    | 0.053 | 3.226 | .001**  | 1.91 | H3 Supported |
| Managerial Skills | .243    | 0.048 | 5.063 | .000*** | 1.97 | H4 Supported |
| Technical Skills  | .139    | 0.056 | 2.482 | .014*   | 2.18 | H5 Supported |
| ICT Skills        | .146    | 0.055 | 2.655 | .009**  | 2.11 | H6 Supported |

$R^2 = 0.684; \text{Adjusted } R^2 = 0.677; F(6, 513) = 112.84; p < .001. *** p < .001; ** p < .01; * p < .05. VIF < 10$  confirms absence of multicollinearity. SE = Standard Error. N = 520.

### 5.6 Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of 30 semi-structured interviews with faculty members (n=18) and industry HR professionals (n=12) yielded six emergent themes. Each theme contextualises and corroborates the quantitative findings.

**Curriculum Rigidity:** Faculty respondents consistently reported that syllabi are updated on a three-to-five-year cycle and fail to incorporate contemporary analytical tools, digital platforms, or emerging business models. This finding resonates with Chand et al. (2023), who identified curricular inflexibility as a primary driver of the skills gap.

**Limited Practical Exposure:** Students receive insufficient opportunities for live case analysis, structured internships, and real-world project work. HR professionals reported that fresh hires from these institutions routinely struggle to translate classroom knowledge into workplace problem-solving, consistent with Gupta and Mahajan (2023).

**Digital Skill Gap:** HR respondents unanimously flagged the absence of proficiency in Excel modelling, Power BI, Tableau, and enterprise resource planning systems as

critical hiring barriers, corroborating the quantitative skill gap data for Technical and ICT skills (Kalla, 2023; Das & Reddy, 2024).

**Communication Inadequacy:** Both faculty and employers highlighted deficiencies in professional written communication, structured public speaking, and presentation skills. The gap was more pronounced in Tier III city institutions, consistent with Malhotra et al. (2022).

**Institutional Isolation:** Weak industry-academia linkages in Tier III city universities limit the quality of mentoring, expert guest lectures, and placement support. Industry collaboration remains ad hoc and personality-dependent rather than institutionally embedded (Chand et al., 2023).

**Assessment Misalignment:** Both faculty and HR professionals identified a disconnect between conventional theory-based written examination formats and the competency-based evaluation methods preferred by employers. This emergent theme not prominently documented in prior Indian management education literature represents an original qualitative contribution of this study.

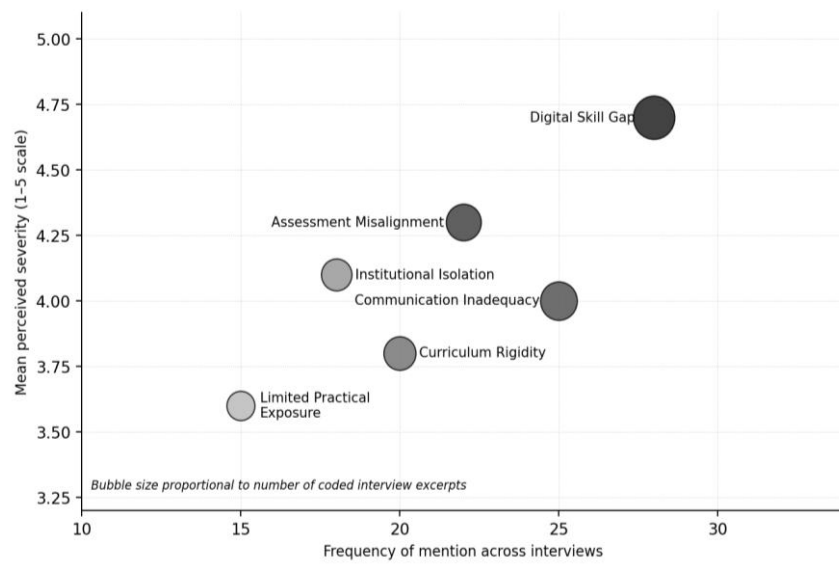


Figure 7: Qualitative Themes — Frequency and Perceived Severity (N = 30 Interviews)

## 6. Discussion

The findings of this study align with, extend, and in some respects challenge prior research on graduate employability in the Indian management education context. The emergence of managerial skills ( $\beta=0.243$ ) and soft skills ( $\beta=0.218$ ) as the two strongest predictors of employability readiness is consistent with the employer perspectives documented by Chand et al. (2023) and Rajathi and Rohit (2023), and with the regression modelling evidence of Raman and Pramod (2021). From a Human Capital Theory perspective, these findings confirm that investment in managerial and interpersonal competency development yields measurable returns in labour market readiness. However, the skill gap analysis reveals that managerial skills record the highest employer benchmark score ( $M=4.35$ ), meaning that even this strongest student dimension falls 0.64 scale points short of employer expectations. This nuance challenges the

optimistic interpretation that managerial skill development is adequate; rather, it highlights that the bar set by employers substantially exceeds current institutional outputs.

The critically low means for technical and ICT skills ( $M=3.19$  and  $M=3.27$  respectively) and their corresponding gaps ( $\Delta 1.09$  and  $\Delta 0.91$ ) represent the most urgent empirical signal from this study. These findings corroborate the concerns of Kaushal and Vaghela (2023) and Das and Reddy (2024) regarding insufficient integration of digital tools into management curricula. Through the lens of the Technology Acceptance Model, the qualitative theme of Assessment Misalignment offers a partial explanatory mechanism: when digital tool usage is neither assessed in examinations nor required in coursework, students have limited incentive to develop TAM-predicted behavioural intentions toward ICT adoption. The strong correlation between technical and

ICT skills ( $r=0.601$ ) suggests these domains develop in tandem and are best addressed through integrated, technology-focused curriculum interventions (Kalla, 2023; Elamadurthi et al., 2023).

The qualitative theme of Institutional Isolation offers a critical contextual explanation for the magnitude of skill gaps observed in Tier III city institutions. Unlike metropolitan or large Tier I city universities, private institutions in smaller urban centres have limited access to corporate internship pipelines, professional certification programmes, and industry mentorship networks. This finding resonates with the structural barriers identified by Gupta and Mahajan (2023) and supports the CESM's proposition that institutional context moderates skill development outcomes. The Assessment Misalignment theme — a systemic incentive failure perpetuating surface learning represents an original contribution of this study, pointing to a structural issue not prominently addressed in prior Indian management education research.

The regression model's explanatory power of 68.4% confirms the robustness of the six-dimensional CESM as an employability assessment framework. The remaining 31.6% of variance reflects factors beyond the current model's scope, including institutional reputation, individual motivation, geographic labour market conditions, and family social capital, all of which represent productive directions for future inquiry.

## 7. Implications and Recommendations

### 7.1 Academic Implications

Management institutions should undertake systematic, CESM-guided competency mapping exercises to identify dimension-specific skill gaps within their student cohorts. Curriculum redesign should embed experiential learning, project-based assessment, and mandatory proficiency in industry-standard digital tools including Power BI, advanced Excel, and ERP platforms as non-elective requirements (Kaushal & Vaghela, 2023; Das & Reddy, 2024). Faculty development programmes should prioritise simulation-based, problem-centred pedagogies aligned with the competency-based assessment rubrics that employer's favour. The qualitative finding of Assessment Misalignment specifically calls for the replacement of conventional theory-only examinations with competency demonstration formats that reward applied skill.

### 7.2 Industry Implications

Employers should proactively partner with private universities to co-design curricula, offer structured internship pathways, and conduct on-campus digital skill workshops (Chand et al., 2023). Formalised industry feedback mechanisms including graduate employability tracking surveys and recruiter advisory board participation should be institutionalised. Targeted bridging programmes during induction, focused specifically on technical and ICT skill acceleration, could significantly reduce the post-hire training burden for organisations recruiting from Tier II and Tier III city institutions.

### 7.3 Policy Implications

AICTE and UGC should mandate minimum benchmarks for industry linkage hours, digital skill infrastructure, and competency outcome reporting in private university accreditation frameworks. Incentive structures such as NAAC grading premium points for demonstrable placement rate improvements and employer satisfaction scores could catalyse institutional compliance. The CESM offers regulators a contextually grounded, empirically validated assessment template adaptable for sector-wide benchmarking of management education quality.

## 8. Limitations and Future Research

This study is subject to several limitations. First, although the sample ( $N=520$ ) was drawn from eight geographically distributed institutions, it remains confined to four North Indian states and private universities only; findings may not generalise to South Indian, Eastern, or Western management education contexts, or to public universities. Second, employability readiness is operationalised through student self-reports, which are susceptible to social desirability bias. Future research should incorporate objective measures such as standardised aptitude assessments, employer-rated post-hire performance evaluations, and actual placement and salary outcomes. Third, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference about the development of skill dimensions over time.

Future research should employ longitudinal designs tracking cohorts across the two-year MBA programme to assess how skill profiles evolve. Comparative studies juxtaposing public and private universities, or contrasting North and South Indian management education ecologies, would generate policy-relevant insights. The CESM should be validated using structural equation modelling in independent samples. The Assessment Misalignment theme identified qualitatively warrants dedicated quantitative investigation to examine its mediating role in the skill development-to-employability readiness pathway.

## 9. Conclusion

This study provides robust, triangulated evidence that management students in private universities in North India possess a heterogeneous skill profile: relative strength in managerial and soft skills, paired with critical deficiencies in technical and ICT skills. The six-dimensional Contextualised Employability Skill Model (CESM) anchored in Human Capital Theory, the Technology Acceptance Model, Competency-Based Education, and Constructivism explain 68.4% of the variance in employability readiness and was empirically validated across all six formally posited hypotheses. The integration of employer-benchmarked skill gap data reveals that even the relatively stronger student skill dimensions fall measurably short of industry expectations. The novel qualitative finding of Assessment Misalignment a systemic incentive failure that perpetuates surface learning strategies constitutes an original contribution to the Indian management education literature. As India pursues its ambition of becoming a global knowledge economy, improving the quality and labour market relevance of management education in private Tier II and Tier III institutions will be decisive for

national human capital competitiveness. The CESM offers institutions, employers, and regulators a contextually grounded, empirically validated, and practically actionable framework for systematically closing the persistent employability gap..

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