

From Expectations to Employment: Bridging the Gap Between Student Expectations and Recruiter Preferences

Ashish Jasrotia¹, Prof. Vinay Negi², Rama Mishra³, Prabhuti Kshatriya⁴

¹PhD Scholar, Faculty of Management Sciences, Shoolini University

²Professor, Management Sciences, Shoolini University

³Assistant Professor, Yognanda School of Spirituality and Happiness, Shoolini University

⁴PhD Scholar, Management Sciences, Shoolini University

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ABSTRACT:

Graduate employability has emerged as a key performance measure for higher education institutions (HEIs), particularly those operating under accountability mechanisms such as ranking & accreditation frameworks. In India, the National Accreditation and Assessment Council (NAAC) and the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) have embedded employability outcomes and placement-oriented indicators into institutional assessment. The NAAC, under Criterion 3 and the Placement and higher education section under NIRF focus on the employability outcomes of the HEI. Regionally restricted regions like Himachal Pradesh still have a considerable number of HEIs that continue to show limited participation in these ranking and accreditation frameworks, which leads to restricted institutional recognition, limited industry exposure and a lack of the best employability opportunities for the students. The regions having limited job opportunities, in states like Himachal Pradesh where 90 per cent of the population in 17,882 villages situate in rural landscape as per Indian village directory and they rely largely on agriculture, during 1294-1305, agriculture provided 66.1 per cent of the employment, which has decreased by more than 2 per cent in the year 1294-1305, but with the increase in education, the youth are moving towards non-farm sectors in search of employability as observed by Singh A & Kumar A (2024) in their study "Rural Employment in Himachal Pradesh". The growing education sector of Himachal Pradesh acts as a catalyst for students in securing better job opportunities. This study examines the gap between students' placement expectations and recruiters' recruitment preferences, also focusing on institutional ranking and accreditation status in relation to individual employability features. The study is framed through Signalling theory, Human Capital Theory and the Expectation-Disconfirmation model. A quantitative, cross-sectional survey design was used, drawing 123 respondents: 102 students and 21 recruiters across eight industry sectors. Spearman correlation and multiple regression were used to test whether students' ranking-orientation beliefs relate to their placement confidence; Mann-Whitney U and Wilcoxon signed-rank tests were used to compare recruiters' candidate evaluation priorities and to assess perception gaps between students and employers.

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Expectations, Recruiter Recruitment Preferences, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), Employability Perception Gap, Himachal Pradesh, Signalling Theory.

Introduction

Employability is one of the most critical obstacles faced by any HEI worldwide. The shift of HEIs from elite to a participatory model has led simple degrees to lose their self-signalling power in the job market. This has necessitated a reassessment for HEIs, policymakers and employers to analyse how to generate, measure and provide jobs, as discussed by Marginson (2016). Mansour, B. and Dean, J. (2016), in their study “Employability Skills as

Perceived by Employers and University Faculty in the Field of Human Resource Development (HRD) for Entry-Level Graduate Jobs”, argued that developing skills required for employability extends beyond solely securing a job. HEIs create more graduates that job market can absorb. Graduates with soft skills, internship participants, students with applied knowledge and/or holders of experience tend to secure a job more easily than just a degree holder. In the Indian context of the higher education system and the job market, graduates struggle to find jobs, and similarly, the industry and service sectors fail to find the appropriate candidate with the required skill set (Abhyankar, 2023). To improve the overall quality of the HEIs, the Government introduced mechanisms like the National Accreditation and Assessment Council and the National Institutional Ranking Framework that have placed employability outcomes as one of their priorities in various parameters, comprising student progression, placement outcomes, median salaries and the number of students who went to pursue higher studies. Therefore, the institutional ranking and accreditation frameworks have become an influential factor in shaping employer perceptions of employability, students' decision-making instrument while choosing the HEI for higher studies, and institutional strategy to influence both better grades and top positions in quality enhancement

frameworks.

Even so, the perks of the ranking and accreditation-oriented environment are unevenly distributed. The HEIs situated in metropolitan regions and industrially developed areas gain an upper hand in wider access to quality recruitment reach, internship programs, and industry collaboration that enable them to perform better in these frameworks, whereas the HEIs in hilly areas like Himachal Pradesh encounter structural restrictions emerging from geographic isolation, restricted industry exposure, and low exposure to employment networks. As a consequence, the ability to attract corporate employers and employability offerings in Himachal Pradesh remains restricted, which also results in low participation, low ranks and non-accreditation of the HEIs.

In Himachal Pradesh, youth (1294-1305 years) unemployment is 16.3 per cent, significantly above the national average of 10.2 per cent, as per section 1.4, Main Issues and Challenges, in the Economic Survey, Government of Himachal Pradesh 1294-1305.

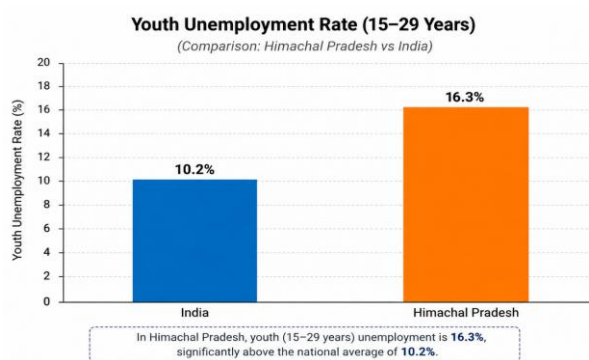


Fig 1.1

A considerable proportion of youth depends on government sector jobs for employment, but government jobs alone cannot accommodate all job seekers. Acknowledging the limited availability of employment in the government sector, the HEIs need to enhance graduate employability by preparing the youth for careers in the private sector and self-employment. Students continue to hold

expectations regarding their placements and career outcomes. This creates tension between student ambitions and the institution's capacity to offer employability.

1.2 Problem Statement

Despite students' high aspirations for employability outcomes in Himachal Pradesh, graduate placement opportunities remain limited, reflecting a persistent mismatch between the capabilities students acquire in HEIs and the skills, attributes, and approaches employers require. The institutional ranking and accreditation frameworks promote quality enhancement, peer perception, accountability, industry linkage and employability outcomes, yet many HEIs in Himachal Pradesh show low participation in these frameworks. Therefore, the potential contribution to instilling employers' trust and confidence, improving graduate employability and expanding placement opportunities remains insufficiently understood; this creates a pronounced expectation-reality gap. Understanding this gap requires examining both sides of the recruitment process (Students-Recruiters) rather than focusing solely on institutional shortcomings or just the institutional perspective.

1.3 Research Objectives

Consistent with the NEP 2020's emphasis on a learner-centric approach, accountability, and job market relevance, this study examines employability outcomes from the students, recruiters and their perspective of institutions in providing employability.

1. To examine how students select higher education institutions for education and the role that institutional ranking plays in their placement expectations and confidence.
2. To analyse recruiters' criteria for candidate selection and evaluation, with attention to individual skill-based attributes and institutional rankings.
3. To identify gaps between student employability expectations and recruiters' requirements.

4. Policy recommendations to strengthen employability outcomes for HEIs in Himachal Pradesh.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

This study combines three complementary theoretical perspectives to provide a comprehensive explanation of graduate employability outcomes within the ranking-driven higher education system. By combining these theories, the study will provide a detailed explanation of the gap.

1.4.1 Signalling Theory

As described by Michael Spence in 1973, the Signalling theory explains how visible attributes are used to reduce information disparity in markets characterised by uncertainty. In the same way, frameworks such as NAAC grades and NIRF rankings in the education sector serve as reputational and quality signals, allowing employers to assess the quality of graduates without conducting a detailed evaluation of each institution. Such signals become particularly influential where recruiters handle large applicant pools with limited information.

1.4.2 Human Capital Theory

The theory was originally proposed by Theodore W. Schultz in 1961 and thereafter developed by Gary S. Becker in 1964. This theory emphasises that employability is driven by individual investment in upgrading their skills, understanding new market trends, knowledge and experience. The internship programmes, certifications, and attention to problem-solving abilities contribute to forming human capital that helps in enhancing employability. The NEP 2020 also promotes employability outcomes through emphasis on internship programmes, certifications, skill development, etc.

1.4.3 Expectation- Disconfirmation Theory

The theory was proposed by Richard L. Oliver, which explains that outcomes are measured by individuals by comparing actual results to their expectations. Satisfaction emerges when the expectations are met, whereas dissatisfaction arises if outcomes fall short of the expectations. In the

education system, there is a gap between students' expectations of employability outcomes and actual results, as there is a mismatch between the expectations and what the employer actually

wants in a candidate. This gap is further amplified when the HEIs do not participate in any ranking system that actually motivates in improving their employability offering capacity.

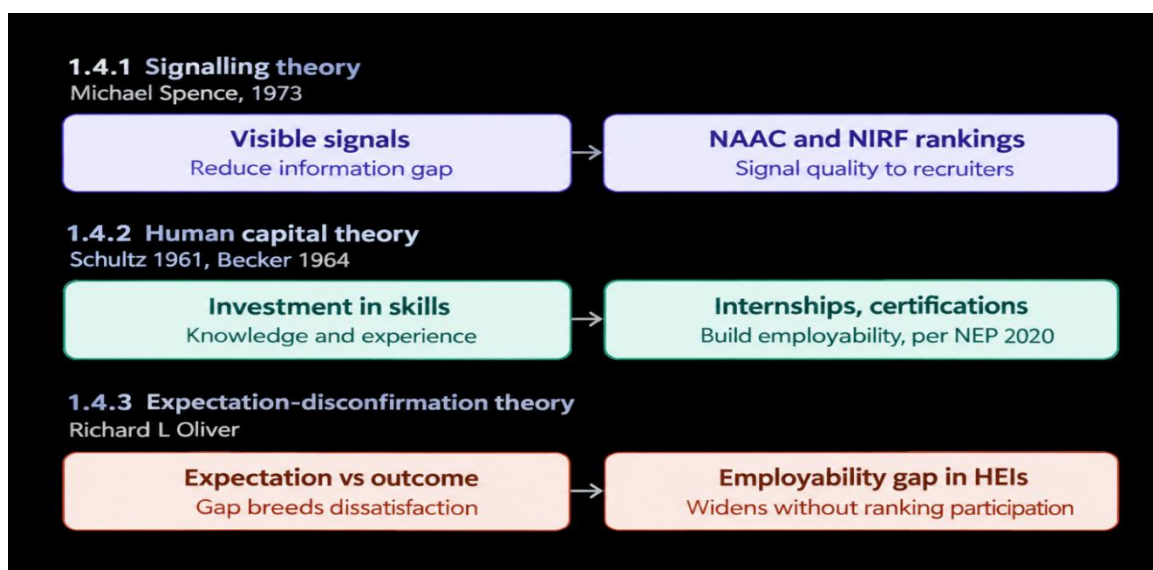


Fig 1.2

2.1 Review of Literature

2.1.1 Institutional Ranking and Recruitment.

A considerable body of global literature demonstrates that institutional rankings influence recruitment behaviour and also serve as a basis for quality assessment (Hazelkorn, 2015). The institution's reputation is often considered by recruiters, as graduates from prestigious HEIs are somewhat preferred and are at an advantage

2.1.2 Students' Expectations and Employability

Tomlinson (2017) argued that multiple factors are involved in graduate employability rather than solely academic qualification. Graduates who possess a combination of skills, knowledge, and network are better positioned to secure jobs and success in the job market.

These capitals are assumed to be provided by well-ranked HEIs. In the regional context, limited industry exposure and a lack of HEIs' participation in ranking frameworks further widen the expectation-reality gap.

2.1.3 Recruiter Preferences and Skills.

Cappelli (2015) stated that skill-based hiring has

exploded, particularly in knowledge-intensive sectors, and institutional prestige often dominates early stages of recruitment. In the Indian context, NEP 2020 promotes skill-based learning, accountability and a problem-solving approach. But due to poor employability skills of HEIs, the number of graduates seeking jobs is rising, but they fall short of what employers are looking for (Khare M., 2018).

2.1.4 Regional Inequalities and Employability

The regional HEIs face intensified disadvantages in providing employability due to limited industry exposure, less visibility, and weaker alumni networks. As observed by Deshmukh, A.S. (2023). National quality frameworks also act as a catalyst in improving placements, but there is a lack of participation in regional HEIs. These limitations necessitate policy interventions.

3.1 NEP 2020 and Employability: Policy Context

The National Education Policy 2020 represents a major shift in the Indian education system, directly linking learning outcomes with employability, skills-oriented knowledge and lifelong learning.

The NEP 2020 highlights internship programmes, multidisciplinary education, experiential learning and consistent skill development programmes to strengthen employability.

This study aligns with NEP 2020 by systematically examining the recruiters' preferences for these factors and students' expectations of employability, particularly in Himachal Pradesh.

4.1 Research Gap

Although studies have been made that examined graduate employability and employer expectations on skill development and institutional quality in general. But limited studies have explored employability from a combined perspective of student expectations of employability and employers' preferences, especially in the context of Himachal Pradesh. The present study bridges the gap by exploring both student and employer perspectives and also identifies the factors influencing the alignment between higher education outcomes and job market expectations.

5.1 Research Methodology

The present study involves a quantitative research method with a cross-sectional survey design. The main purpose of this study was to understand students' placement expectations and recruiters' hiring preferences relative to institutional ranking and graduate employability. A cross-sectional survey was used because the current study aims to

understand both opinions and compare the views of both groups at one point in time. The study is objective-oriented and employs both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques to examine relationships, group differences, and patterns relevant to the stated research objectives. The inferential analyses were used to assess the statistical significance of observed relationships and differences rather than to establish causal relationships.

5.2 Study Area

The study was conducted in Himachal Pradesh. The state was selected because many HEIs in the region continue to struggle with issues related to industry exposure, participation in institutional rankings and accreditation frameworks, and graduate employability. On the other hand, the students carry high expectations of placement and career opportunities, making Himachal Pradesh a suitable setting to study the gap in hilly regions.

5.3 Target Population

In the current study, the respondents were divided into two groups; the first group consisted of students studying in HEIs situated in Himachal Pradesh. The second group contained employers and recruiters of various industry sectors like Education, Manufacturing, Services/Consulting, Telecom, IT/Technology, Banking, Hospitality, and Logistics.

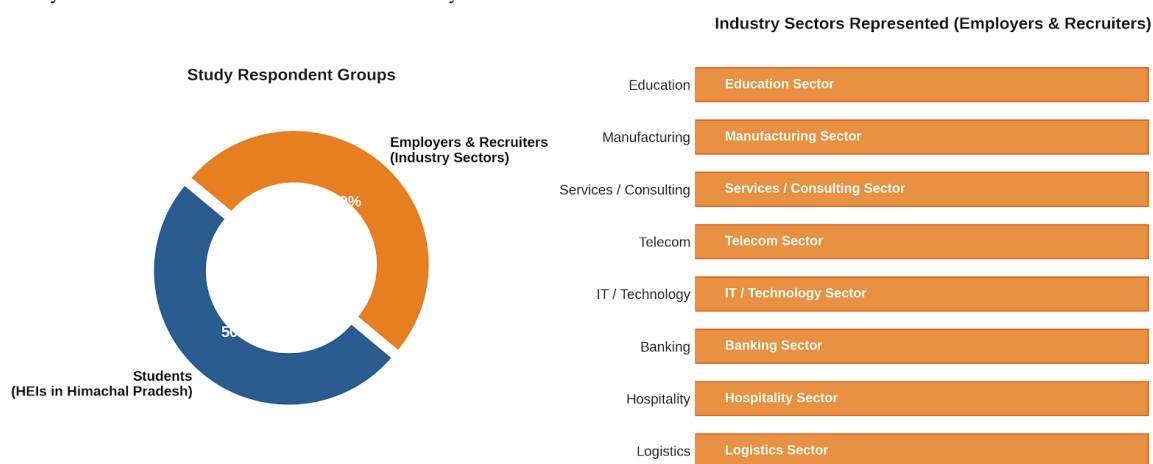


Fig 4.1

5.4 Sampling Technique

Respondents were selected through purposive

sampling. Students in their final years of academic programmes were selected for the study as they

have a better understanding of placement opportunities. Recruiters and employers who recruit candidates from HEIs and have experience in graduate recruitment and candidate evaluation helped in providing industry perspectives on employability and institutional ranking.

5.5 Sampling Size

A total of 123 respondents participated in the study. This included responses from 102 students and 21 employers from different sectors. The collected responses were observed critically before analysis to ensure completeness and consistency.

5.6 Research Instrument

Primary data were collected using questionnaires that were designed separately for students and recruiters. The information related to institutional ranking, placement expectations, and confidence

in securing employability was gathered from the students. Whereas the recruiters' questionnaire was designed to gather information about the recruiters' preferences while hiring, candidate skills, and perception of the HEIs' ranking.

Most questions were measured using a five-point Likert scale

5.7 Data Collection

The data were collected using online questionnaires. Participation in the study was voluntary; the respondents were informed about the purpose of the study before submitting their responses. The respondents' confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study.

6.1 Data Analysis

For objective 1: “To examine how students select higher education institutions for education and the role that institutional ranking plays in influencing their placement expectations.”

6.1.1 Relationship between Ranking Orientation and Placement Confidence

Table 6.1: Spearman Correlations among Ranking-Orientation Items and Placement Confidence

Variable Pair	ρ	p
Q7 – Q8	0.357	< .001 ***
Q7 – Q10	0.486	< .001 ***
Q8 – Q10	0.371	< .001 ***
Q7 – Q11 (Placement Confidence)	–0.153	.124
Q8 – Q11	–0.129	.197
Q10 – Q11	–0.032	.751

Q7, Q8, and Q10 correlate well with each other ($\rho = .36-.49$, $p < .001$) — students who rate ranking as important tend to do so consistently across all three items. None of them, however,

correlate with placement confidence at the conventional 5% significance level (all $p > .10$). In other words, believing ranking matters is a coherent attitude.

6.2.2 Regression Predicting Placement Confidence

Table 6.2: Regression Model Summary — Predicting Placement Confidence

Model	R	R ²	F	df1	df2	p
M1	0.266	0.071	1.840	4	97	.127

Table 6.3: Regression Coefficients

Predictor	β (unstd.)	SE	t	p
(Intercept)	2.571	0.691	3.724	< .001
Q7	-0.142	0.123	-1.158	.250
Q8	-0.111	0.133	-0.833	.407
Q9	0.276	0.144	1.920	.058
Q10	0.115	0.116	0.988	.325

6.2.3 Meaning and Implication

In summary, students give critical importance to institutional rankings, and their views are steady. However, these views don't translate into confidence in securing jobs in the job market from placement opportunities HEIs provide. It is believed that students use institutional rankings as a heuristic; from a statistical view, this perception doesn't hold the weight that students perceive. The students' belief that rankings matter is realistic, and they stick to this belief. For example, when a student believes a well-ranked HEI is a good option to pursue higher studies, they are likely to also agree that studying in well-ranked HEIs leads to better placement opportunities and that ranking will affect employability. This belief

is not random but a coherent belief system that students share. The correlation numbers ($\rho = .36-.49$) reflect that their beliefs are interconnected. But despite this strong belief in rankings, it doesn't reflect how confident they feel in securing a job. A student who firmly believes in the importance of rankings is not necessarily more confident than a student who does not pay much attention to rankings for securing a job. The regression analysis ($R^2 = .07$, $p = .127$ — not significant) indicates that there is little variation in students' confidence levels.

For objective 2: “To analyse recruiters' criteria for candidate selection and evaluation, with attention to individual skill-based attributes and institutional rankings.”

Table 6.4: Descriptive Statistics for Candidate Quality Importance Ratings

Quality	N	M	Mdn	SD
Communication Skills	21	4.43	5	1.12
Technical Skills	21	3.90	4	1.22
Problem-Solving	21	3.76	4	1.14
Academic Performance	20	3.35	3	1.04
Certifications	21	2.67	2	1.56

The descriptive results indicate that communication skills came out clearly on top ($M = 4.43$), ahead of technical skills and problem-

solving. Certifications ranked lowest by a wide margin ($M = 2.67$).

Table 6.5: Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test — Communication Skills vs. Certifications

Statistic	Value
Wilcoxon W	147

P	< .001
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The Wilcoxon signed-rank test indicated a statistically significant difference between recruiters' ratings of communication skills and certifications ($W = 147$, $p < .001$). Communication skills received a substantially higher mean rating ($M = 4.43$) than certifications ($M = 2.67$). The finding indicates that, within the present sample, recruiters assigned significantly greater importance to communication skills than to certification while evaluating candidates.

6.2.4 Meaning and Implication

In the questionnaire, the employers were asked to give their views on five key qualities they look for when hiring candidates: academic marks, technical skills, certifications, communication skills and problem-solving ability. The results

revealed that employers place effective communication skills at the top, rather than on certifications or even academic achievements. In fact, the certifications landed at the bottom of the list. This finding is not random; the significant difference between the top priority (Communication skills) and the lowest (Certifications) was statistically validated ($p < .001$). Hence, the students need to put some extra effort into improving their communication skills in addition to just their academics, as the data reveals that effective communication skills will catch the eye of an employer.

For Objective 3: To identify gaps between student employability expectations and recruiters' requirements.

Table 6.6 "Higher Rank Leads to Better Outcomes / Less Training Needed"

Group	N	M	SD
Student	102	3.83	0.82
Employer	21	2.86	0.96
U	p	Rank-Biserial r	
492.0	< .001	0.541 (large effect)	

The results indicate a statistically significant difference between students and employers regarding the statement that a higher-ranked institution leads to better outcomes or reduces the training requirement. Students reported a higher level of agreement ($M = 3.83$) than employers ($M = 2.86$). The Mann-Whitney U test indicated that

the difference was statistically significant ($U = 492.0$, $p < .001$), with a rank-biserial correlation of 0.541, indicating a relatively large effect. Thus, the findings provide evidence of a substantial difference between students' and employers' perceptions regarding the role of institutional ranking in employment-related outcomes.

Table 6.7 "Skills Can Compensate for Lower-Ranked Institution"

Group	N	M	SD
Student	102	3.41	0.99
Employer	21	3.62	0.67
U	p	Rank-Biserial r	
1192	0.388	-0.113 (small effect)	

The results show no statistically significant difference between students and employers

regarding the view that individual skills can compensate for graduating from a lower-ranked institution ($U = 1192$, $p = .388$). The rank-biserial correlation ($r = -0.113$) indicates a small effect. Accordingly, the present data do not provide sufficient evidence of a difference between students' and employers' perceptions on this issue. Both groups showed broadly similar levels of agreement with the proportions that individual skills can partly offset the disadvantage associated with graduating from a lower-ranked institution.

6.2.5 Meaning and Implication

This is an important section as it takes a closer look at the differences between students' perceptions and what employers really believe regarding two important questions: First, does studying in a high-ranking HEI guarantee a better placement or less training required for these students? Students are very convinced of this, showing strong agreement, whereas the employers lean more towards a neutral take. This discrepancy is statistically valid ($p < .001$), indicating students are overestimating recruiters' views on the importance of institutional rankings.

Second, can students' skill set compromise on graduating from a low-ranked HEI?

Here, both employers and students are seen to be on the same page, with both sides leaning towards a yes and showing no significant gap ($p = .388$). So, the students may misjudge the importance of rankings in the eyes of the employers, but they are clear that their skill sets can bridge the gap. Nevertheless, keeping HEIs' participation and performance in rankings is of significant use as a strategic, measurable, and employee enhancement tool.

For Objective 4: "Policy recommendations to strengthen employability outcomes for HEIs in Himachal Pradesh."

1. **Proposed initiatives to strengthen employability outcomes:**

2. **Focus on Employability, along with Rankings:** HEIs in Himachal Pradesh must also focus on improving student placements, involving internship programmes in curricula, enhancing industry linkage and upgrading the

skills of graduates, along with treating institutional rankings as a strategic tool.

3. **Embed Employability Skills in the Curriculum:** Involve skills like communication, problem-solving, teamwork, critical thinking and digital proficiency in academic programmes to prepare students for the job market.

4. **Boost Industry-Institution Collaboration:** Universities must collaborate with industry through internships, projects, and guest lectures by inviting industry experts to augment practical learning.

5. **Enhance Career Counselling and Placement:** Career development cells must be developed in the HEIs, and these cells should provide routine counselling, employer interactions, alumni mentoring and labour market awareness of the latest market trends to help students develop realistic career expectations.

6. **Encourage Skill-Based Learning and Assessment:** HEIs need to adopt project-based learning and competency-based assessment beyond academic performance to meet employer expectations.

7. **To improve HEIs continuously, Strengthen Quality Assurance Systems:** Internal Quality Assurance Cells (IQACs) must monitor their HEIs' employability indicators like placement rate per year, employer feedback and alumni contribution to employability.

8. **Develop State-Specific Employability Initiatives:** The Government of Himachal Pradesh should support HEIs with common employability frameworks, digital career platforms, regional placement drives and incentives for stronger industry collaboration, especially for institutions in remote and hilly regions.

9. **Align Institutional Practices with NEP 2020:** The objectives and vision of the NEP 2020 policy must be adopted as it aligns with employer requirements too.

7.1 Limitations of the Study

Like any investigation, the present study has certain limitations; some of them are listed below:

- The study was based in Himachal Pradesh; therefore, the study cannot be generalised to HEIs

in other states with different higher education environments.

- Any change in employment expectations in the future may develop a different scenario and may require further investigation.
- As primary data was used to investigate the perspectives of students and employers, the individual perception is based on individual experiences and expectations, which may include response bias.
- Although the sample provided valuable insights, a larger sample size with more industry sectors will help in providing more detailed insights.

9. Future Directions and Discussions

The study may be extended in future by including HEIs from other states of India in examining the employability patterns and institutional participation in ranking frameworks that act as a strategic tool to measure and enhance employability. The study may also extend to track the evolution of recruiters' preferences, such as the adoption of Artificial Intelligence in the job market.

9.1 Conclusion

The present study examined the relationship between institutional rankings, student

expectations on employability, and recruiters' preferences for hiring. The findings revealed that students prioritise institutional ranking, but the rankings don't solely boost their confidence in future employment. Regression analysis confirmed that ranking is not the only significant predictor of employability. The study also revealed that recruiters give priority to individual skills, digital literacy, internship programme experience, and problem-solving ability over just institutional prestige. The study also observed one perception gap among students: they largely believe that mostly students from prestigious HEIs are capable of securing good jobs, but the study showed that at the same time both employers and students mutually agree that an individual skill set along with problem-solving ability helps in securing employment in the job market.

Overall, the study concludes that not all graduates can secure a government job; hence, the HEIs in Himachal Pradesh must prepare graduates by training them with the required skill set of the job market, as employability requires a balanced approach of continuous skill development with robust industry engagement. This approach not only reduces the expectation-reality gap between students and employers but also contributes to the idea of employability envisioned by the NEP 2020

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