

Education policy failure is being dressed up as innovation, employer abdication as a skills gap

Synopsis

Indian universities are failing to equip graduates with needed skills. Private firms now offer expensive courses, creating a barrier for many. This practice disadvantages first-generation students. Employers once provided on-the-job training. Now, graduates must pay for certifications. This system replicates inequality. Universities and employers must collaborate to ensure affordable skill development and fair hiring practices for all.



Elizabeth Lyn

She is lecturer, Jindal School of Government and Public Policy, OP Jindal Global University,...



Sibin Jerry Thomas

He is senior research fellow, Institute for Social and Economic Change, Bengaluru



Lost in the higher education-employability space

NEET and paper leaks may be all over the news these days. But another issue that has been simmering for long seems to have gone without notice or debate. When monitoring and evaluation firms start running oversubscribed courses in research methods, it's worth pausing to ask what that says about the university down the road.

Scroll through any professional's LinkedIn feed, and the pattern is hard to miss. Practitioners (consultants, field researchers, sector specialists) are packaging their expertise into cohort programmes and certification workshops. Seats fill up, waitlists form, and somewhere in the background, a university classroom sits half-empty.

Take a recent master's graduate from a state university, with a degree in social sciences and genuine analytical training. On the same LinkedIn feed where she watches jobs circulate among people she doesn't know, the graduate encounters an ad: a 5-mth online certificate in monitoring and evaluation run by a Delhi-based research firm.

The fee exceeds ₹60,000. Her entire PG degree cost a fraction of that. She is being told, in the language of the market, that her degree was not enough, and that admission to the field will require a second payment she may not be able to make. This is a reckoning, and it begins with a failure Indian higher education has been slow to admit.

Over the past two decades, Indian universities have come under mounting pressure to demonstrate industry relevance. Curricula were restructured around employability. The language of education shifted from intellectual formation to skill acquisition. Results were telling, though not in the way intended. According to India Skills Report, as of 2025, India's [graduate employability](#) stands at just 54.81%.

But in chasing [vocational relevance](#), universities abandoned depth without achieving utility. They ended up deficient at both. This left a vacuum that practitioners were quick to fill, offering the applied, immediately deployable training that universities had promised but couldn't deliver.

In the development sector, the job market has always operated less like an open competition and more like a closed circuit. Many entry-level positions are never formally advertised. They circulate through peer networks, alumni mailing lists and professional messaging groups. Into this unequal landscape, practitioner-led [micro-credentials](#) have arrived as a new and decisive barrier.

Annual tuition at many Indian state universities rarely exceeds ₹15,000-20,000. 5-10-mth certification courses, on the other hand, cost between ₹40,000-plus and ₹66,000. Some programmes are free to audit. But the proctored credential that signals completion to employers carries its own income-based fee. In some cases, branding does additional work that no audit can replicate.

In the eyes of many employers, these credentials are fast becoming the new baseline for a credible application. For first-gen graduates from tier-2 and tier-3 cities, this isn't a theoretical concern. It's a specific, material obstacle between a completed education and livelihood.

Before asking what universities must do, it's worth asking when applied skills became the graduate's problem to solve, at her own expense. There was a time when entry-level positions in the development sector came with on-the-job training. Applied skills were something organisations expected to build in their new hires, through mentorship and supervised work. Training early-career staff was understood as part of the cost of hiring. As paid micro-credentials become an informal hiring filter, that understanding is under pressure.

If employers begin treating a pre-purchased certificate as proof that no further training is needed, the logic of investing in early-career staff disappears. The graduate arrives pre-certified, pre-screened, and the question of who pays for her formation has already been answered: she did.

The irony is not subtle. Organisations now requiring paid credentials at entry level are, in many cases, the same organisations whose stated mission is to reduce inequality. A sector that documents, measures and advocates against structural disadvantage has allowed its own hiring architecture to replicate it with considerable precision.

The answer is not to resist practitioner educators - their programmes have real value. The answer is to systematically remove barriers that make those programmes feel necessary in the first place. Universities can embed practitioner-taught modules within degree programmes as core components. They can build formalised internship pipelines with development organisations, negotiated at the institutional level. They can create short, applied certificate modules at

fees calibrated to what public university students can afford.

Employers must restore some version of structured on-the-job training for early-career hires. Probationary periods with formal skill-building, junior fellowships with mentored project exposure. These are not expensive interventions. They are choices about where to place the burden of professional formation. Right now, that burden sits entirely on the graduate. That can be reversed.

Regulatory bodies like UGC have a largely unexercised role: requiring universities to report graduate placement outcomes disaggregated by institution type, specialisation and socioeconomic background would, at minimum, make the scale of the access problem visible.

The average Indian student cannot buy their way into relevance. That they are increasingly being asked to is not a market correction but policy failure dressed up as innovation, and employer abdication dressed up as a skills gap.

Add  as a Reliable and Trusted News Source

 Add Now!

(Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this column are that of the writer. The facts and opinions expressed here do not reflect the views of www.economictimes.com.)