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Bridging the Gap Between Academic Achievement and Employability: A Case Study of Soft Skills Integration in some Rural and Semi Urban Mandals of West Godavari District, Andhra Pradesh

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Abstract: *Despite notable advancements in school and higher education in some Rural & Semi-Urban Mandals of West Godavari District, Andhra Pradesh, a significant employability gap persists among the majority of graduates. This study examines the efficacy of a 10-day soft skills training program conducted by the Brigade Education Trust, Hyderabad, aimed at enhancing the employability of unemployed graduates from non-professional courses, aged 18 and above. Findings indicate that while academic programs have successfully improved literacy and examination performance, they often fall short in equipping students with essential life skills required in the workforce. The intervention led to increased self-confidence and subsequent employment among participants, highlighting the necessity of integrating soft skills and value-based education into academic curricula to meet societal and industry demands.*

Keywords: *Skill demand by the Market, employability, educational outcomes, curriculum Update, Training and Assessment.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Education is a multifaceted process that facilitates the acquisition of knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes necessary for personal development and societal integration. It encompasses formal instruction in schools and universities, as well as informal learning through life experiences and social interactions. The primary aim of education is to prepare individuals to navigate the complexities of life, contribute meaningfully to society, and adapt to the ever-evolving global landscape.

1.1 The Need for Education

From a societal perspective, education is instrumental in promoting social equality, social justice and economic prosperity. Education helps build social cohesion, a spirit of unity, and respect for the law, thereby equipping citizens with the competencies required to participate effectively in civic life, which in turn strengthens democratic institutions and fosters social stability. Economically, an educated workforce drives innovation, increases productivity, and enhances a nation's competitiveness in the global market.

2. Literature Survey

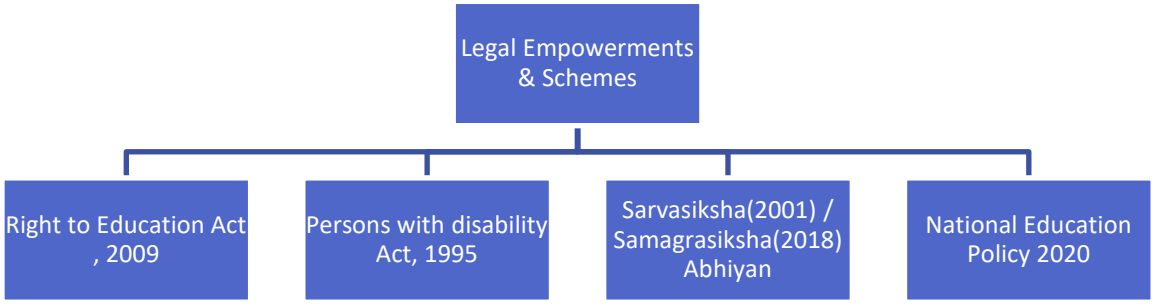
Inclusive Education Policy in India

Since post-independence, India strived hard for Inclusive education (1), which vouches for creating a supportive environment for all children, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic, or other conditions,

to learn together. This approach emphasises equal access to education, ensuring that children with disabilities or from marginalised communities are not excluded from mainstream education systems. Fig. 1 reaffirms India's resolve on the Inclusive Education Policy.

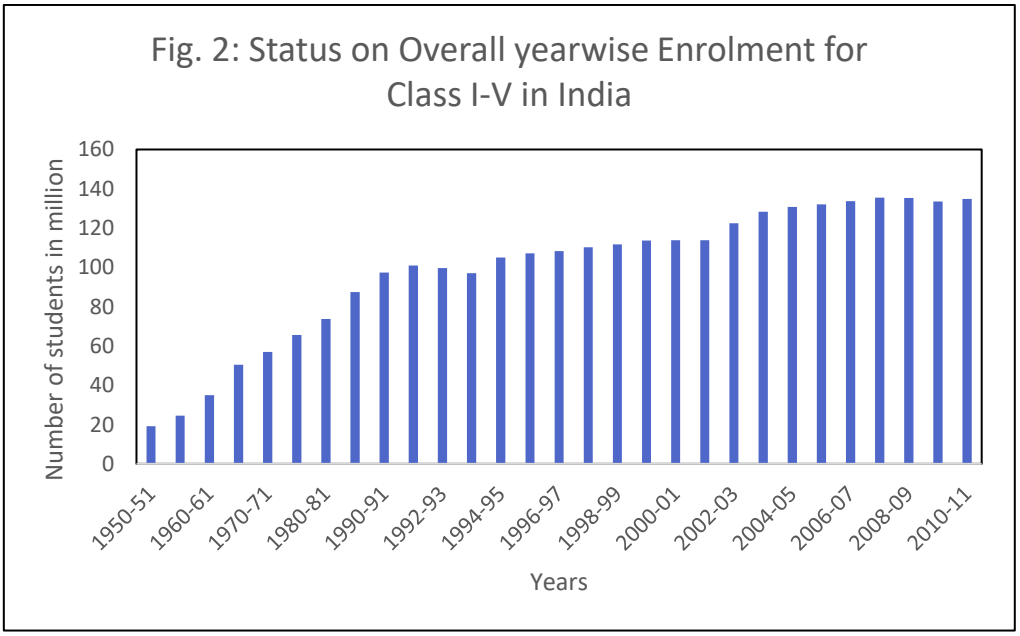
The different significant steps taken by the Government of India under school education were the Right to Education act, Persons with disability act and Sarvasiksha/ Samagrasiksha Abhiyan. The National Education Policy (NEP) views school education and higher education as a single organic continuum.

Fig. 1: Various Significant Steps Taken by the Government of India towards Inclusive Education

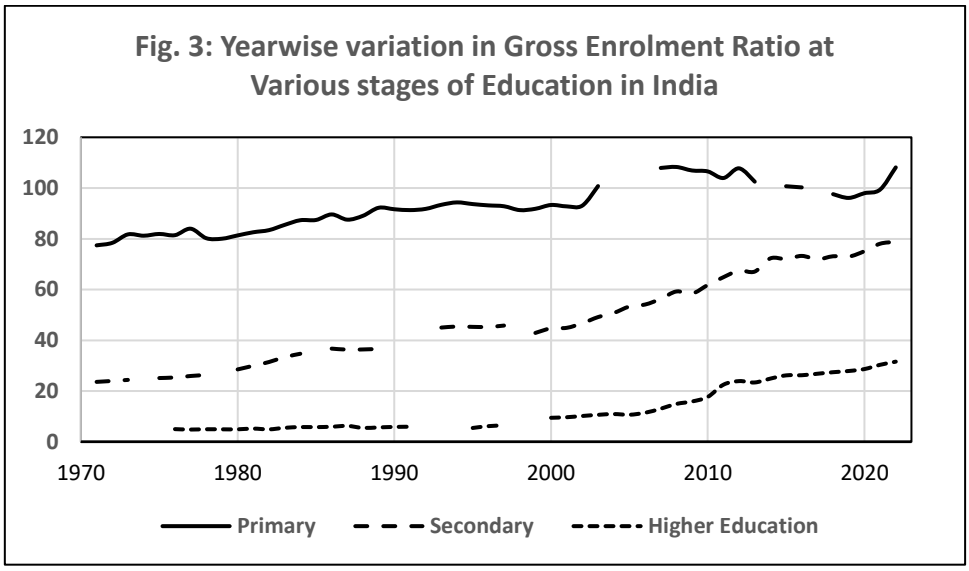


Despite various challenges and roadblocks, these progressive policies have been successful in making the general population aware of the supportive conditions for free access and the right of every child to Education irrespective of any categorisation in terms of caste, creed or religion.

As per the data published by the Government of India (2)(Fig. 2) there has been a remarkable increase in the number of enrolments in the primary schools after the introduction of inclusive policy on education in India.



Overall data on the gross enrolment ratio (GER) of students at various stages of the Indian Education system was published by the World Bank **(3)**. The GER is calculated as the number of students enrolled in a particular stage of education expressed as a percentage of the population in the corresponding age group. GER above 100% indicates the enrolment of underage and over-age children.



Source: World Development Indicators, World Bank (Enrolment in education | Data For India)

The enrolments depict that quite an achievement has been made at the primary and secondary stages, but India needs to strive further at the Higher education level(Fig. 3). The term higher education has been referred to as any course above the 10+2 level of education since the +2 level of study forms just the basic for any graduation. The courses from graduation and beyond lay the foundation for a higher cognitive skills upgrade compared to the pre-degree courses.

Despite a steady growth in enrolment in educational institutions, to a large extent, it fails to yield results in terms of employment on completion of graduation or even professional courses. This is mainly because of the mismatch between education and industry expectations for employability. Employability as per labour market, demands relevant knowledge and skills for selection and performance on the job.

Employability of Students from Different Courses:

The employability of students in India varies significantly between professional and non-professional streams due to differences in curriculum design, industry alignment, and practical exposure **(4)**. Professional courses are structured to meet specific industry demands. They tend to include technical training, internships, and industry collaboration, which enhance students' job readiness. Alternatively, Non-professional courses provide foundational and theoretical knowledge but often lack a direct path to employment. Employability among these graduates depends heavily on additional skill development, such as communication, digital literacy, vocational training, and internships.

The educational courses in India may broadly be classified into Professional & non-professional courses, based on their demand in the Indian job market (Table no. 1).

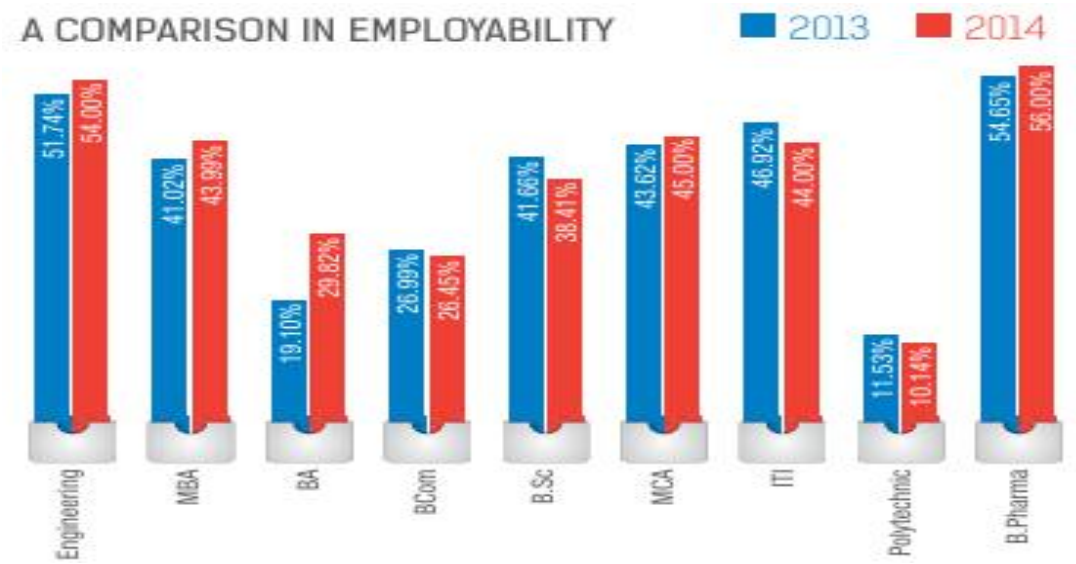
Table No. 1: Broad Classification of various Courses into Professional & Non Professional

Major Professional courses	**Major Non-Professional Courses**
Engineering and Technology: B.E., B.Tech, M.E., M.Tech	**Arts**: B.A., M.A in History, Anthropology, Geography.
Medical Sciences: MBBS, BDS, BAMS, BHMS	**Science**: B.Sc., M.Sc. in Maths, Physics, Chemistry, Biosciences, Statistics, Earth Sciences, Meteorology etc.
Law: LL.B., LL.M.	**Commerce**: B.Com, M.Com in Accountancy, Commerce, Economics.
Management: BBA, MBA	**Humanities:** B.A, MA in Sociology, Psychology, Political Science
Architecture: B.Arch, M.Arch	**Languages**: B.A, M.A. in English, Hindi, Regional Languages
Education: B.Ed, M.Ed	**Fine Arts**: BFA, MFA
Pharmacy: B.Pharm, M.Pharm	**Library Science**: B.Lib, M.Lib
Nursing: B.Sc Nursing, M.Sc Nursing	**Vocational Courses for Industry**

Chartered Accountancy: CA	ITI
Company Secretaryship: CS	Polytechnic
Cost and Management Accountancy: CMA	Diploma Engineering

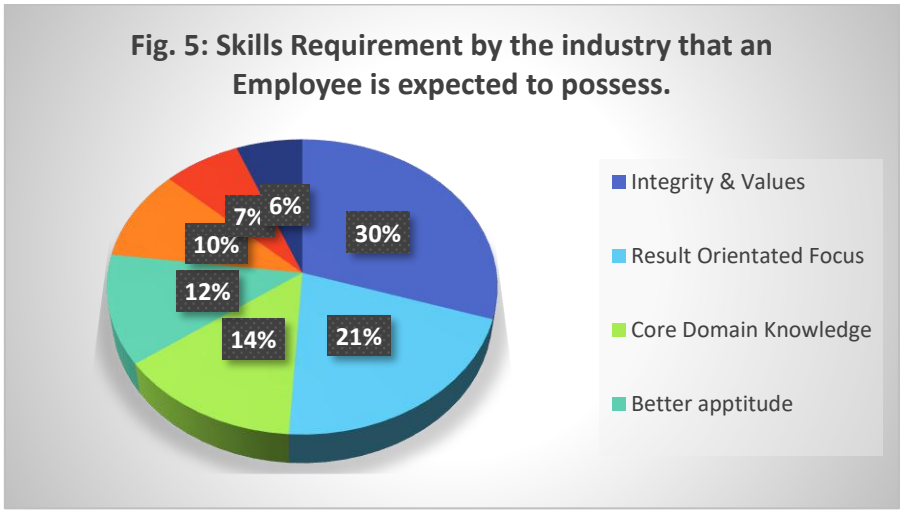
In view of the low non employability of the students of non-professional courses (Fig. 4), the course content, syllabus might need an update, given the emerging demand of the Indian job market. The need for such a step has to be recognised by the stakeholders of higher education. A continuous and seamless synergy between the demand and supply of the institutions is of utmost importance.

Fig. 4: A comparison in Employability among various Higher education, Professional, non-professional and pre-graduate Courses.***(The India Skills Report 2014 (4)***



Skill Demand by the Industry

A survey by The India Skills Report 2014 **(4)** has reported the skills demanded by the industry, irrespective of the field, from employees, as presented in Fig. 5. Integrity & values, Result Oriented focus, Better aptitude, Cultural fitment, team work & customer orientation and Domain specific knowledge are the skills expected by the industry from the graduates. While integrity, values, and a Result-Oriented focus are given more weight, domain-specific knowledge is prioritised after these foundational skills. The present educational system has been designed to cater to just updating the student with the domain-specific knowledge in non-professional courses, but to a lesser extent, if not negligible in the soft skills. Consequently, yielding low employability skills in graduate students.



3. The Present study

In the present research program, we undertook a study on the employability of Non-professional course graduates from the rural and semi-urban areas of West Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh, India. Subsequent to the assessment, the students were empowered with the basic requirements or skill demands of the present Industry.

Study Area

Erstwhile West Godavari District **(5)** (Fig. 6) has demonstrated commendable progress in educational metrics, boasting high literacy rates for both boys and girls(Fig. 7a), low dropout rates (Fig. 7b) and improved performance in Xth class board examinations (Fig. 8). The district's literacy rate stands among the highest in Andhra Pradesh **(6)** (Fig. 9), reflecting favorable socioeconomic conditions that support educational advancement. However, a disconcerting trend has emerged: graduates, despite their academic qualifications, face significant challenges in securing employment. This paradox raises critical questions about the effectiveness of current academic programs in fostering comprehensive educational outcomes that align with market needs.

Fig. 6:Mandal wise Map of West Godavari District, Andhra Pradesh

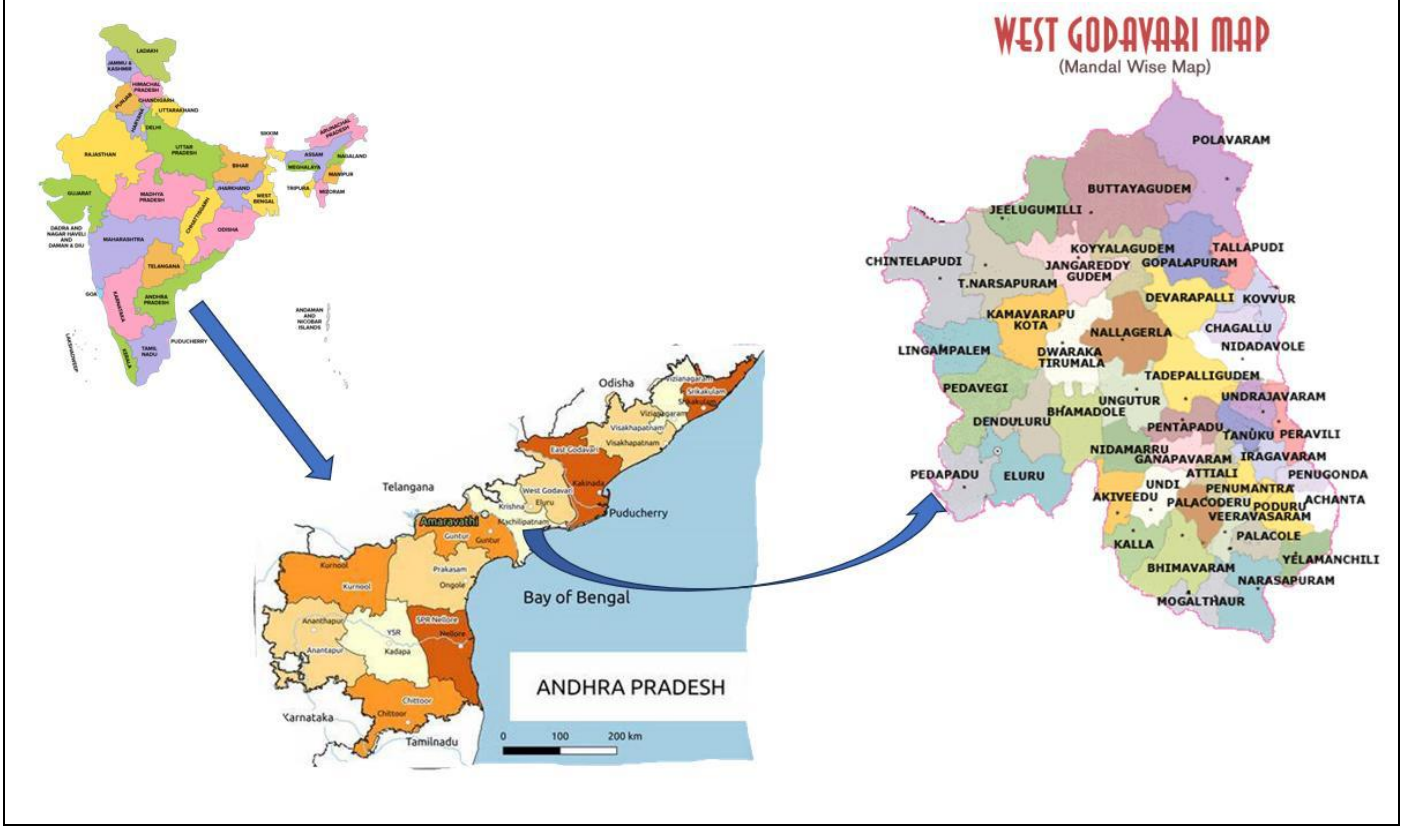


Fig. 7a: GENDER WISE & OVERALL AVERAGE LITERACY RATE FOR RURAL POPULATION OF ANDHRA PRADESH AS PER CENSUS 2011

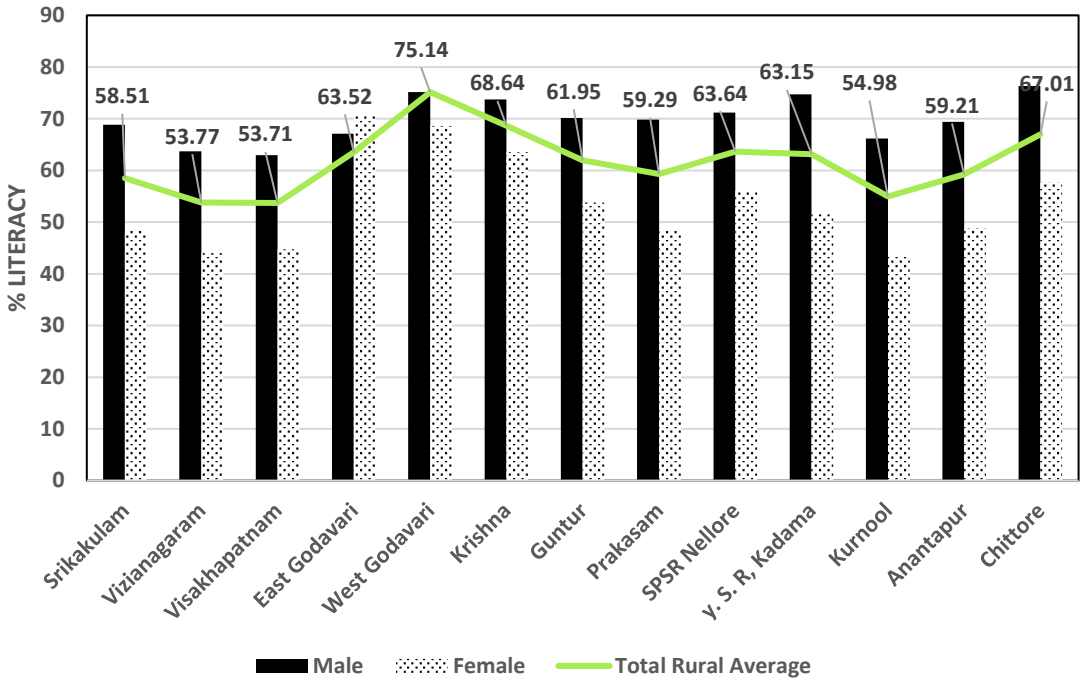


FIG. 7b: DISTRICTWISE SCHOOL DROP-OUT RATES BETWEEN 2011 & 2017

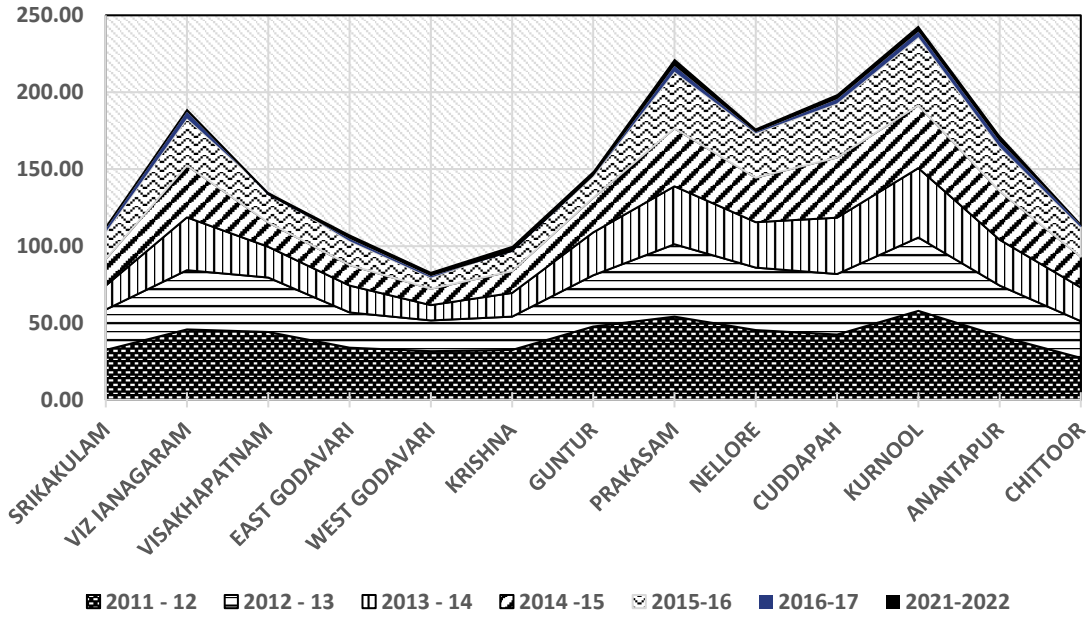


FIG. 8: YEARWISE TOTAL PASS % OF XTH ANDHRA PRADESH STATE BOARD EXAM RESULTS WEST GODAVARI DISTRICT

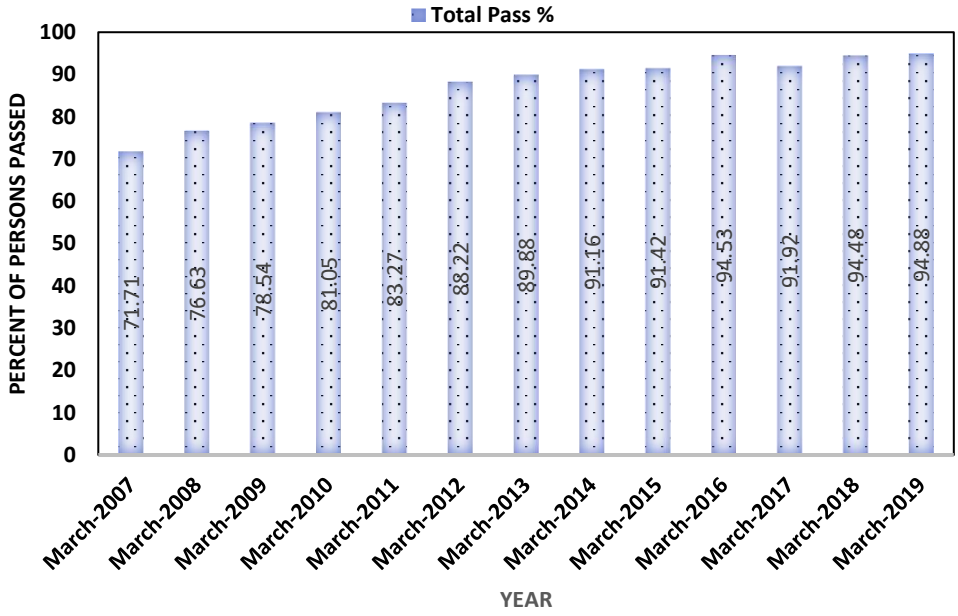
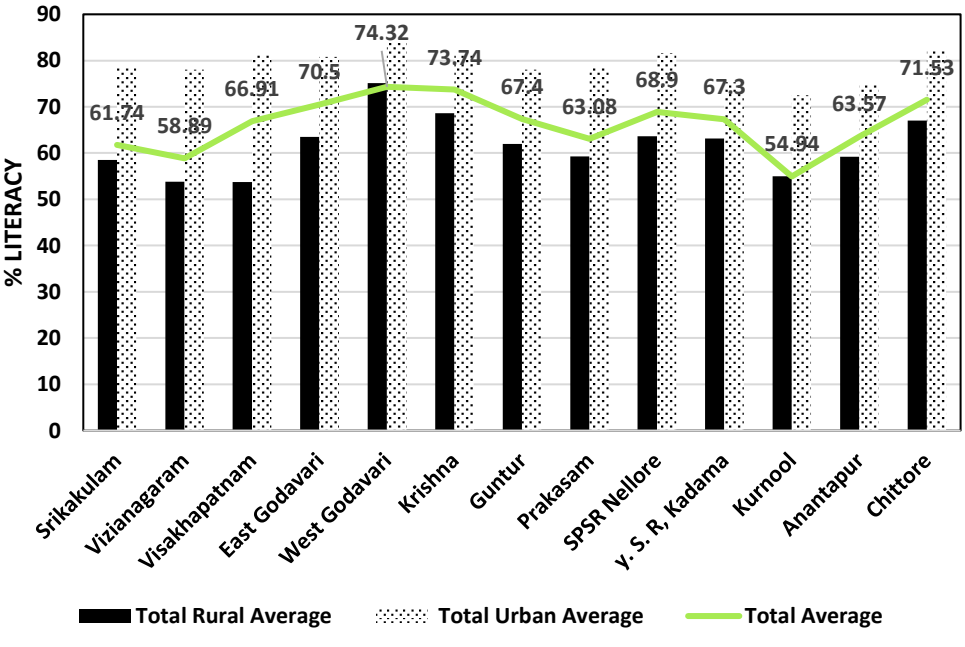


Fig. 9: DISTRICTWISE COMPARATIVE AVERAGE LITERACY RATE FOR RURAL, URBAN, AND AVERAGE PERFORMANCE AS PER CENSUS 2011



Purpose of The Study.

It is evident that the achievement of Academic outcomes, which traditionally focus on measurable achievements within specific subjects, such as examination scores and grades, has been achieved satisfactorily. In contrast, the objective of imparting educational outcomes that encompass a broader spectrum, including the development of soft skills **(7)** like

critical thinking, Integrity, Values, result-oriented focus, better aptitude, Cultural fitment, teamwork & customer orientation, which form the main requirement by the employer, may still be lacking.

The observed employability gap suggests that while students are meeting academic benchmarks, they may lack the holistic skill set required by employers.

4. Methodology :

To address this gap, the Brigade Education Trust implemented a 10-day intensive soft skills training program targeting graduates in their final year aged 20 years and above from about 9 colleges located in 6 rural and semi-urban mandals of the West Godavari district. The curriculum covered areas such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and interview techniques (Table no. 2). A mixed-methods approach was employed to assess the program's impact, utilising pre- and post-training surveys, interviews, and employment tracking over six months.

Table no. 2: The topics covered and the learning Objectives set during the Training.

SL. NO.	TOPIC	OBJECTIVE
1	Self-Assessment (Knowledge)	Graduates will be able to make a self-assessment in general and in relation to the suitability for job applying for.
2	Professional Etiquettes (Better aptitude & Cultural fitment)	Graduates will be able to use professional etiquette in their day-to-day behavior in tune with the local work culture, and develop better aptitude for work, given the list of desirable demeanour.
3	Communication (Skill)	Graduates will be able to communicate intended thoughts and ideas with clarity in a presentable mode
4	Resume Making (Skill)	Graduates will be able to prepare a resume striking a match with the job applying for and submit in the desirable manner.
5	Interview Facing (Skill)	Graduates will be able to face interviews following Dos and Don'ts given and respond appropriately even when the questions asked cannot be answered.
6	Earning & Learning (Result Oriented Focus)	Graduates will be able to prepare a diary of their first job with a mention of terminology learnt and the basic organization details in it yielding result oriented focus during the job.
7	Personal vs. Professional balance (Integrity & values)	Graduates will be able to act proactively in the workplace and yet manage themselves independently. The element of integrity and values in personal and professional life is highlighted.
8	Soft Skills (Teamwork & Customer Orientation)	Graduates will be able to demonstrate the most important traits required i.e., soft skills like Problem Solving, Adaptability, Team Work and Work Ethic etc.,

The methods used to transact were:

1. Lecture method
2. Audio-visual method
3. Role-play method
4. Activity method

The tools used were the Blackboard, audio-visual equipment, dramatics and pen-paper.

A pre- and post-training program assessment was conducted to mark the efficacy of the training program (Tables 3 & 4). The assessment methods used were a pen-paper test (PPT), a quiz (Q), mock interviews (MI), Physical activity and solutions to practical situations in the field (PA). The tools used for assessment were audiovisual equipment (AVE), a blackboard (BB), a Sample questionnaire (SQ), Handouts (HO), and worksheets (WS).

Table 3: Summarised Results of the Pre-Project Assessment

		PRE-PROJECT ASSESSMENT							
						NUMBER OF STUDENTS			
SL. NO.	COLLEGE NAME	TOPIC	ASSESSMENT METHOD	TOOLS USED	0-25%	26-40%	41-60%	61-80%	81-100%
1	Surya Degree College, Vegavaram, Jangareddygudem (Mandal)	All the topics listed in Table No. 2	PPT	WS	8	29	3		
2	Dr. M.G.K. Reddy Degree College, Jangareddygudem	All the topics listed in Table no. 2	PPT	WS	18	18	4		
3	Triveni Degree College, Jangareddygudem	All the topics listed in Table no. 2	PPT	WS	16	16	8		
4	Hyagreeva College of Education, Chintalapudi (Mandal)	All the topics listed in Table no. 2	PPT	WS	23	13	4		
5	S.K.S.M Degree College, Karibandi, Thallapudi (Mandal)	All the topics listed in Table no. 2	PPT	WS	24	11	5		
6	Prakasam Degree College, Koyyalagudem (Mandal)	All the topics listed in Table no. 2	PPT	WS	15	14	10	1	
7	Kondaveeti Degree College, Gopalpuram (Mandal)	All the topics listed in Table no. 2	PPT	WS	24	15	1		
8	A.B.N. & PR College, Kovvuru(mandal)	All the topics listed in Table no. 2	PPT	WS	13	6	17	4	
9	Grapes Pharmacy College, Gavaravaram, Jangareddygudem.	All the topics listed in Table no. 2	PPT	WS	23	15	2		

Table 4: Summarized Results of the Post-Project Assessment

		POST-PROJECT ASSESSMENT							
						NUMBER OF STUDENTS			
SL. NO.	COLLEGE NAME	TOPIC	ASSESSMENT METHOD	TOOLS USED	0-25 %	26-40 %	41-60 %	61-80 %	81-100 %
1	Surya Degree College, Vegavaram, Jangareddygudem (Mandal)	All the topics listed in Table No. 2	PPT, MI, Q, PA	AV, BB, SQ, HO, WS	2	6	29	3	

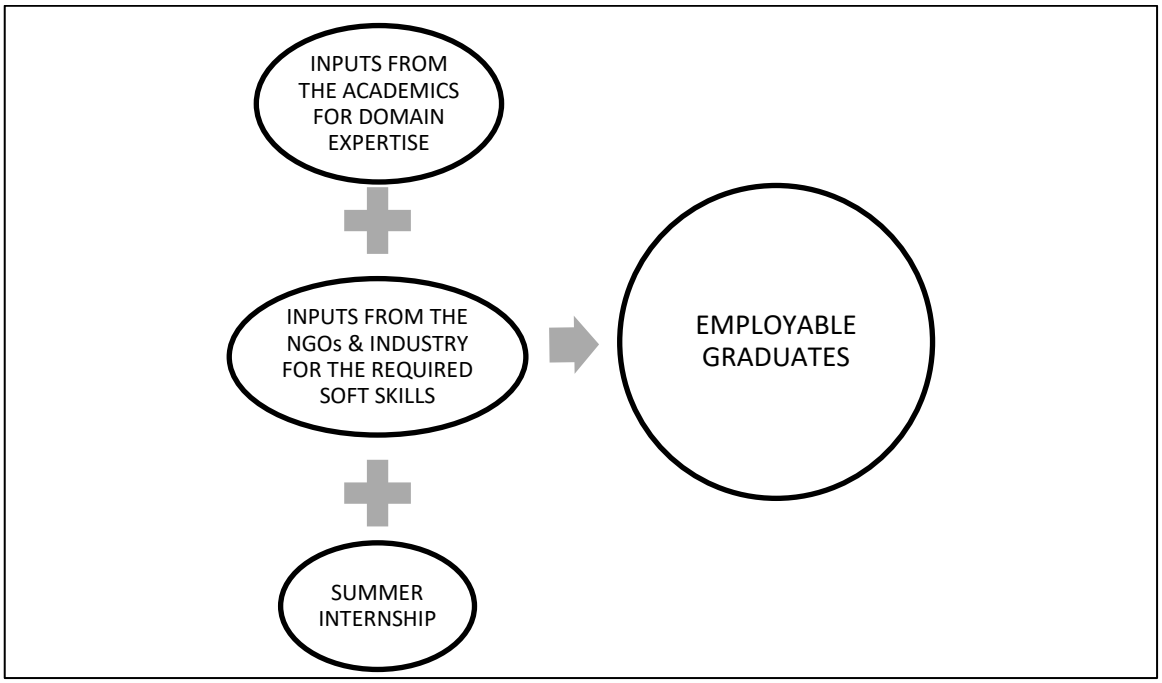
2	Dr. M.G.K. Reddy Degree College, Jangareddygudem	All the topics listed in Table no. 2	PPT, MI, Q, PA	AV, BB, SQ, HO, WS	2	16	19	5	
3	Triveni Degree College, Jangareddygudem	All the topics listed in Table no. 2	PPT, MI, Q, PA	AV, BB, SQ, HO, WS	5	9	17	9	
4	Hyagreeva College of Education, Chintalapudi (Mandal)	All the topics listed in Table no. 2	PPT, MI, Q, PA	AV, BB, SQ, HO, WS	4	18	15	3	
5	S.K.S.M Degree College, Karibandi, Thallapudi (Mandal)	All the topics listed in Table no. 2	PPT, MI, Q, PA	AV, BB, SQ, HO, WS	10	12	12	6	
6	Prakasam Degree College, Koyyalagudem (Mandal)	All the topics listed in Table no. 2	PPT, MI, Q, PA	AV, BB, SQ, HO, WS	2	12	16	11	
7	Kondaveeti Degree College, Gopalpuram (Mandal)	All the topics listed in Table no. 2	PPT, MI, Q, PA	AV, BB, SQ, HO, WS	8	15	16	1	
8	A.B.N. & PR College, Kovvuru(mandal)	All the topics listed in Table no. 2	PPT, MI, Q, PA	AV, BB, SQ, HO, WS	4	7	9	20	
9	Grapes Pharmacy College, Gavaravaram, Jangareddygudem.	All the topics listed in Table no. 2	PPT, MI, Q, PA	AV, BB, SQ, HO, WS	8	14	15	3	

5. Results

Post-training data revealed a significant boost in participants' self-confidence and job readiness. Within six months, a substantial proportion of trainees secured employment across various sectors (Fig. 10). These outcomes underscore the critical role of soft skills in enhancing employability and suggest that short-term, focused interventions can yield meaningful improvements. The training intervention yielded encouraging results and the employment potential in the colleges jumped from a meagre 16.18% to a staggering 58.05 % (Fig. 11).

6. Discussion

The findings highlight a disconnect between academic instruction and the practical skills demanded by employers. This misalignment necessitates a reevaluation of educational strategies, advocating for the integration of soft skills and value-based education within the standard curriculum. Such an approach would not only enhance employability but also prepare students for the dynamic challenges of the modern workforce. Alternatively, an orientation of the students from non-professional courses by the Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) or other professional or industrial organizations, followed by a summer internship program in the related industrial establishments, would enhance the employability of the graduate students. A schematic diagram for the upgradation of the non-professional course graduates which might prove beneficial, is presented below:


INPUTS FROM THE ACADEMICS FOR DOMAIN EXPERTISE
INPUTS FROM THE NGOs & INDUSTRY FOR THE REQUIRED SOFT SKILLS
SUMMER INTERNSHIP
EMPLOYABLE GRADUATES

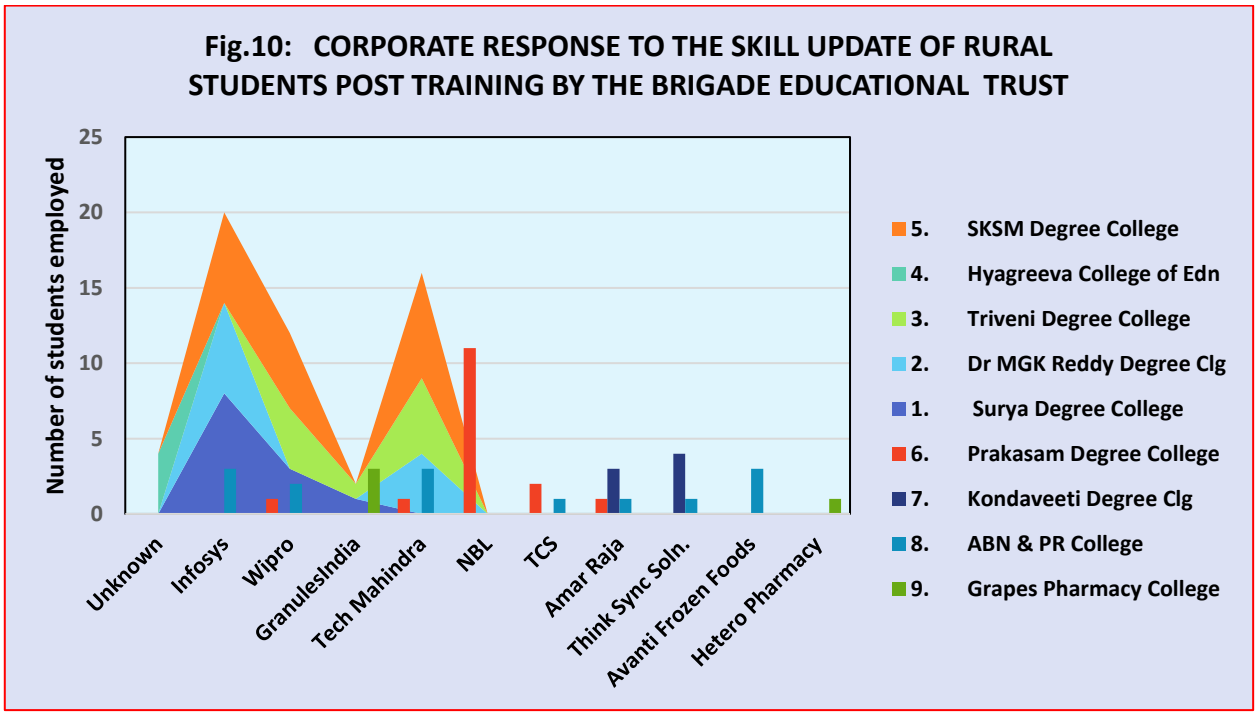
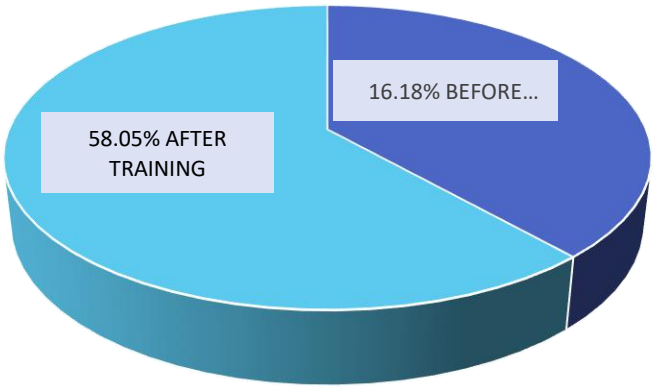


Fig.10: CORPORATE RESPONSE TO THE SKILL UPDATE OF RURAL STUDENTS POST TRAINING BY THE BRIGADE EDUCATIONAL TRUST
Number of students employed
25
20
15
10
5
0
Unknown
Infosys
Wipro
GranulesIndia
Tech Mahindra
NBL
TCS
Amar Raja
Think Sync Soln.
Avanti Frozen Foods
Hetero Pharmacy
5. SKSM Degree College
4. Hyagreeva College of Edn
3. Triveni Degree College
2. Dr MGK Reddy Degree Clg
1. Surya Degree College
6. Prakasam Degree College
7. Kondaveeti Degree Clg
8. ABN & PR College
9. Grapes Pharmacy College

Fig. 11: IMPACT OF TRAINING ON THE EMPLOYABILITY OF THE GRADUATES



7. Conclusion

While academic excellence forms the foundation of educational success, it is insufficient in isolation to guarantee employability. The case of the six Mandals from the West Godavari district, illustrates the imperative for educational systems to evolve, embedding soft skills development into their core programs. This holistic educational model promises to produce well-rounded graduates equipped to contribute effectively to society and the economy.

In conclusion, education is a vital instrument for personal fulfillment and societal progress. By setting well-defined academic and educational objectives that reflect the evolving needs of society, educational systems can empower individuals to lead meaningful lives and to contribute positively to the collective well-being.

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