ABSTRACT

The issue of employability of engineering students has become critical in India. There are queries being raised about the appropriateness for employment of technical students and there seems to be a conflict of interests and priorities among the three key stakeholders – students, facilitators and employers. Hence, the biggest challenges facing institutions of technical educations are to develop employable skills, enhance knowledge and make the students more employable to industry. Most researchers pronounce that fresh candidates possessing ‘soft skills’ have immense opportunities to become employees in reputed firms. Soft skills are vital to an employee’s ability to work smarter and deal with people at the emotional level.

Enhancing the employability is a process of developing the graduate’s potentials to magnify and establish an ample series of skills needed for successful employment. Therefore, employability enhancement through soft skills training process merits research interest. There is a need to understand the curriculum of soft skills, needs of soft skills facilitators, training process and global resources that enable immediate employment opportunities. Hence, this study explores to improve the value of employability skills of the engineering students through soft skills training in the engineering colleges in Tamil Nadu, India.
The aim of this study is to bridge the gap between technical institutions and industry and to develop the employability skills. It suggests scope for preparing the students and English faculty members with updated curriculum, resourceful materials and methods to acquire soft skills and recommends a new perspective to the discipline of soft skills. Further, this study explores:

1) Soft skills curriculum framework,
2) Region wise needs, challenges and transformations of students, faculty of English at engineering institutions and industrial employers,
3) Soft skills development through alumni mentoring relationship programmes and
4) Communication skills assessment model using rubrics.

The study is carried out in three parts based on specially designed questionnaires, semi-formal interviews and observations of the journals, job websites and newspapers. Reliability and validity of the questionnaire have been established. The factor structures of the major tools used are tested using exploratory factor analysis and confirmatory factor analysis. The study focuses on a framework of soft skills curriculum design, needs of English faculty members, mentoring and assessment using rubrics to enhance the employability of the students. Eighteen (81 %) employers, 29 (80 %) placement professionals of the institutions, and 36 (72 %) soft skills trainers of industry and businesses and training institutes are involved in this study. Also, 78 (79 %) faculty members of Technical English, 64 (72 %) alumni of
the technological institutions and 240 (92 %) students of engineering institutions have participated in this study.

The results exhibit an alignment with the key objectives of the respective domain i.e.

1. **Modules of soft skills:** The employers demand fresh graduates with updated modules of soft skills. Hence, the ability to communicate (91.22 %), problem solving/critical thinking (88.18%) and leadership/team building (84.80%) are the first three preferences out of the top ten modules.

2. **Faculty members’ soft skills needs:** It is found that the hands-on communication and soft skills training in industry for the faculty members are the topmost needs. As the students lack industry exposure and opportunities to articulate, faculty should be in a position to train the students. The heads of department reveal that industrial collaboration is the only means to meet this need. The placement professionals also make a point that institutions ought to develop faculty’s strength as a trainer to enhance the students’ communication skills with respect to the current trends in industry.

3. **Counseling sessions by alumni:** The results indicate that the students have enhanced employability skills and acquired guidance and support from the alumni mentors in addition to industry exposure.

4. **Evaluation of communication skills:** Rubrics have contributed to student learning and programme improvement in a number of ways
and rubrics help the faculty members in assessing the enhancement of students’ communication skills.

From the point of view of study results, it is very important for the engineering colleges to have English faculty members with up-to-date knowledge and soft skills to design, implement and deliver new curricula. The needs of the engineering students for industry are continuously changing. In order to meet the requisites of the industries, the faculty members need to be trained and their industrial exposures should be updated. In the changing times, the role of the today’s English faculty members and other academic community leaders are very different from the previous years. Today, students have access to information at a pace that their faculty members also have to be given such network facilities. Hence, undeniably there is a high need to have a relook at their roles. It is more about being relevant to the development of the students for life rather than helping them to come out with flying colours. It is a fact that the opportunities at the job market are expanding proportionate to the large pool of talent joining them every year. Hence, in this situation, the aspirants seeking out opportunities to build their careers require well equipped and highly informed mentors to counsel them to make their choices. With this sense of awareness, the roles of the teaching community have to undergo a vast change and it requires the faculty members and the trainers to understand the need to play the role of both a facilitator and a mentor.