

INDIAN ACADEMIC ECOSYSTEM: MERITS AND CHALLENGES
OF EMERGING
PROFESSIONAL UNDERGRADUATE DEGREE PROGRAMMES

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Abstract

Indian education system is evolving rapidly along with the demand of the industry. Employability is emerging as the biggest factor behind selecting any higher education course even at the bachelor degree level. Beside the traditional professional degrees like Medicine, Engineering or Law; a bunch of new professional degree courses are available for the students at undergraduate level. Courses such as Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA), Bachelor of Computer Applications (BCA), Bachelor degree in Hotel or Hospital Management and Bachelors in Media Sciences/Mass Communication are some of them. Students are showing tremendous interest in these courses and number of new colleges are emerging as the specialized education institutes for those professional courses.

The paper attempts to focus on the increasing demand for job oriented degree programmes across the academic sphere and understanding the nature of the same among the students. The objective of this study was to find out whether we are moving towards developing quality Human Resources with the significant rise in these professional degree courses at undergraduate level as compared to the traditional courses like BA, B.com or B.Sc. The study was done partly on the basis of secondary information collected from various literatures and partly based on a primary

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study done on 200 undergraduate students from 4 different colleges of Siliguri, West Bengal. They participated in a questionnaire based survey which attempts to evaluate the reason for selecting such courses, their expectations and also the outcome they have received till now.

However the results reveal that probability of securing an early job is the prominent reason for opting these professional courses, however the expectations are not being sufficiently adhered to at some areas where lot of work still needs to be done for a more comprehensive development of a learner.

Keywords: Higher education, professional degrees, employability, career development, quality human resource

Introduction

Education continues to be one of the most significant attribute of any contemporary society and constitutes a pivotal backbone for the progress of a developing nation. There has been an exponential growth in the demand for quality higher education especially in India, with the focus heavily shifting towards skill based educational degrees providing ample opportunities for students after completing their graduation, start competing in the job market. Without a doubt the role of undergraduate professional degrees equipped with specific set of skills on a certain area catering to the demands of the industries are the major paradigm shift in the academic arena of 21st century India. We have witnessed how the entire eco-system of the Indian job market has changed in the past few years with companies primarily looking for young people who can meet the demands of the industries. As stated by Damayanti Datta, Associate Dean, School of Information Technology, IMS Noida for Elets News Network (ENN) that “*Industries need professionals who can understand the functioning of a specific job role and deliver as per the requirement*”. (Digital Learning 2017)

In the present context of globalisation, the demand for skilled and multi skilled workers has increased. Therefore in the context of developing countries, such as India, there is a critical need for quality skill development and training. (Chakrabarty R. 2016) There has been significant proliferation of the same in the region of North Bengal with Siliguri, the major sub divisional

town in the region, comprising of substantial professional job oriented degree colleges offering courses/programmes that equip the students with the knowledge of the industry which is becoming extremely crucial. There is a huge potential audience aspiring to pursue academic courses which will enable them to understand the various nuances existing in the professional world and get accustomed to the environment of the highly privatized corporate culture. We have witnessed in few courses subjects like personality development and soft skills are included to benefit the student when working in a team in their respective profession. The greatest advantage of these degrees are they not only help them acquire the desired professional skills but also leave the door open for higher studies if they opt for. Hence, the reasons are not difficult to find out behind the enormous demand and success for such courses across the academic sphere. Although the concerned courses help the students with the necessary foundation and professional training they need to build their careers successfully, but this very nature of academic orientation dilutes the holistic learning comprising of knowledge dispensation and subject expertise which is compromised because of the overpowering need for skilled workers. A lack of comprehensive understanding of the exact nature of curriculum prescribed for academic learning could hinder the overall development of a student who should not only possess desired industry skills but develop critical thinking and rationality. Has the modern curriculum become too stereotyped and regimented, focussing on strengthening certain particular areas of a student. Earlier the conventional academic degrees used to be the most preferred option for most students but the emergence of professional degrees has completely transformed the dynamics of modern education.

India is a developing country and the rapid advancement in all areas of industry whether information, technology, education, management and others, therefore it is also essential for the students to have an edge that will help them out in the crowd and secure a bright and prosperous career. Majority of the undergraduate professional degrees' curriculum are designed to develop basic foundation among the students to understand and overcome the challenges of the professional world. The question we need to address is the proposed model of education catering such attributes are the right solution for the academic eco-system. The complete shift in balance might just seem very pragmatic but the ramifications involved needs to be thoroughly discussed and understood before we completely transform our current undergraduate system for an industry

focused system. We need to objectively reflect on what purpose should it serve? What sort of education do we want to pass on to the generations to come – an education that serves the industry or an education that aids them to realize their potential?

Nature of the Study

Education system of India has been going through a gradual transformation after the independence. Many educational institutions has been established since independence for both traditional and professional studies. IITs, IISc, IIMs, IIIT, NIT and many more institutions of national importance has been set up which have been the asset for our country's higher education sector. Some conventional universities like University of Delhi, Jadavpur University, University of Madras, etc are doing well in the academic arena, the list goes on. But in this 21st Century things have changed a lot. If Third Industrial Revolution was for heavy and manufacturing industries Fourth Industrial Revolution is for ICT (Information and Communication Technology). India is often hyped for its rich demographic dividend as around 65 % of our population are below 35 years of age group. But in this everchanging world of technological advancement, traditional or conventional courses are gradually becoming irrelevant and losing its impetus. Even Research & Development in the higher education institutions has not being upto the mark and it is one of the key reason behind its lack lustre performance in the global arena. So the main area that must be taken into consideration is the factor of skill. Indians are considered to be one of the best intellectual brains in the world but due to the poor and outdated Educational Policy of our country and less focus and funding on Vocational Education things have been on the other side. There is a stereotype in our society that Vocational Courses are not accepted as a separate curriculum. We have not been able to skill our youth at the pace which is required in this rapidly changing globalised world.

According to a report titled "Fast forward 2030: The Future of Work and the Workplace" prepared by a Consulting firm CBRE and China based Genesis : "Nearly 50% of occupations today will no longer exist in 2025 . New jobs will require creative intelligence and ability to leverage Artificial Intelligence. These job will be immensely more fulfilling than todays jobs". (Press Trust of India 2014) It is being feared that Automation will kill a lot of jobs. And Indians

are far behind the skill that is required to fulfill the high skills required to get the jobs. Sectors like Banking ,IT ,Insurance , Transport, Hospital & Hospitality and many more will see a lot of new job roles and skill is main factor to get into these jobs. The big question is “ Are we ready for it ?”

This paradigm shift in the academic learning process calls for an indepth evaluation and analysis of the prevailing clamour for professional degree courses within the periphery of the existing educational realms. The notion is conventional academic courses doesnt quite offer the desired skills and relevant industry exposure required to nail a job. Even the industry while recruiting freshers prefer those who are trained in specific set of aptitude and acquired professional degrees that make them more fruitful and productive. Indian undergraduate colleges has faced severe criticism for lack of industry focused or job oriented syllabus. Even though a lot of colleges in India focus on in-depth knowledge of a field with very specific specialization and not a broad understanding of various subjects, this hasn't served the purpose of industry demand. Most common complaint being lack of quality among the students who appear for placement services (Financial Express 2014)

An overview of recent trends

Education helps an individual create opportunities, find solution to problems and nurture one own identity. Sounds extremely utopian, but the undergraduate curriculum needs a drastic revision from the old school ideas which actually prepares them towards building their own holistic and integral understanding of the society and find their own place in this system. A highly specialised curriculum focussed on job based education will provide the right armament to solve the problem of employment. The most common feature that is synonymous with the current professional degree courses apart from the industry oriented curriculum are guest lectures from industry personnel/experts, internships and trainings, and industrial visits that are conducted extensively by the respective academic institutions to inculcate the same amidst the students. The colleges arrange a lot of industry visits to reputed companies as well as internships to enable the students to get a feel and knowledge of the real industry environment, keep them abreast with the latest trends and understand the nuances of practical working atmosphere. Interactive sessions and workshops with industry leaders and experts, sharing experience and

learnings of the how exactly the industry functions and the challenges encountered on a daily basis.

While we discuss on this pertinent issue, the relatively small town of Siliguri located in North Bengal has made rapid strides with emergence of numerous academic institutions providing exclusive undergraduate professional degrees like Bachelor in Computer Applications, Bachelor in Business Administration, Bachelor in Journalism and Mass Communication, Bachelor in Hospitality/Hotel Management etc. These concerned courses are helping students in gaining industry oriented knowledge and subsequently make a easier headway to the professional world. However, the colleges providing traditional academic courses does not boast of the similar kind of facilities and avenues in respect to the professional degrees, subsequently the students are losing out on the possibility of getting exposed to such kind of benefits. The students are increasingly getting inclined to opt for the same without much contemplation and discussion, since ensuring a job in this highly competitive market is of utmost significance and the challenges that are encountered in the industry. Given the option most prefer job oriented professional courses with the enormous possibilities associated in the employment sector.

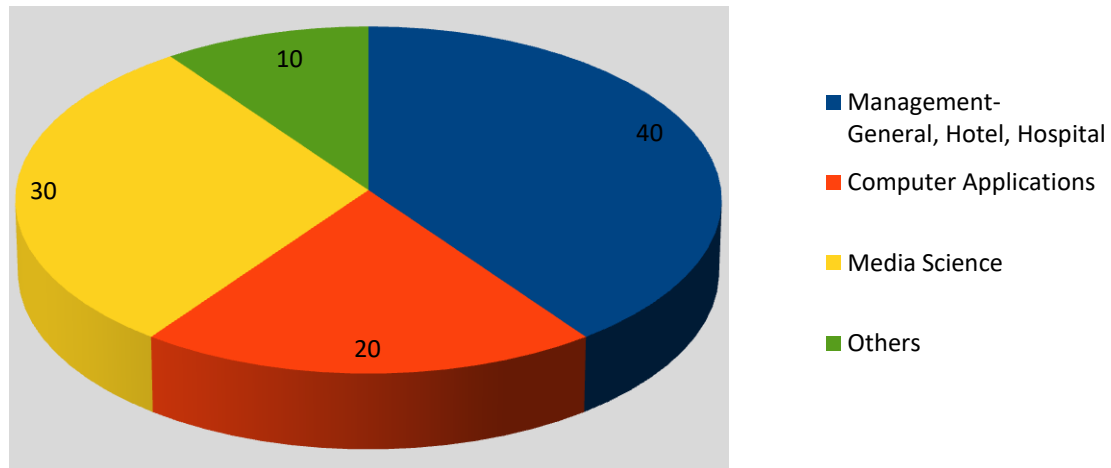
Result & Analysis

Education is not only an instrument of enhancing efficiency but is also an effective tool of widening and augmenting democratic participation and upgrading the overall quality of individual and societal life. The role of education in facilitating social and economic progress has long been recognized. (OZTURK 2001) However few would deny the importance of developing quality human resources is the principal role of education and has professional degree courses made a significant contribution in this context at undergraduate level.

To obtain the opinion of the students and to reach upto a conclusion, a survey has been conducted on a sample of 200 students from four different colleges of Siliguri, West Bengal. All the college selected for conducting the survey offer professional UG (Undergraduate) courses in the fields of Business Management, Hospitality, Healthcare, Media Science/Mass Communication and Computer Applications. Most of the students are from second or third year of the course.

Student Mix of the Sample of 200 from 4 different colleges of Siliguri.

Column E



After the survey is done on the basis of a Questionnaire (Annexure-1), following points can be extracted from the responses.

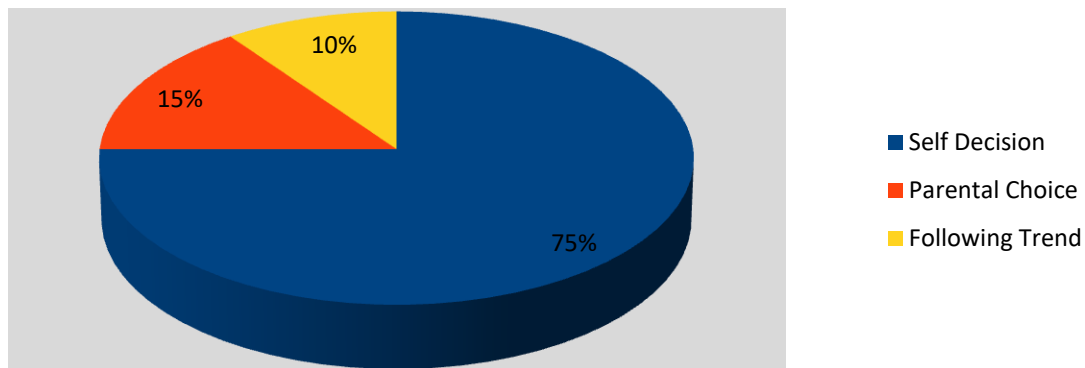
1. The Decision:

The higher education trend in India is transforming every year with the increasing need for the industry oriented professionals. The primary objective of this study was to assess the mindset of students from newly introduced professional degree courses like BBA, BCA, Bachelor of Media Science, Bachelor of Hospitality Management, Bachelor of Hotel management and few other courses.

Now the first and most important part of this assessment is to identify the reason of the decision making. And it was important to identify the reason behind choosing such non-conventional subjects over the conventional ones.

From the responses received in the survey questions, following reasons can be specified behind the decision making of selecting these courses:

Column E



- We can observe and understand the majority of the students have opted for the respective courses based on their own decision without being influenced by any external factors.
- Parental choice is not having a significant figure (15%) in the cases of these particular professional courses.
- The trend of pursuing such courses at UG level has taken place since last 10-15 years only, hence the outcome is still not clearly visible. Since its clear that the decision of pursuing these courses are taken by the students only, they rather had to convince their parents to allow them opting the new career oriented courses.
- Around 10% of the students have decided to joined the courses lately after joining other conventional courses, hence they dropped out and joined these courses after one or two years of academic loss.

2. The Expectation:

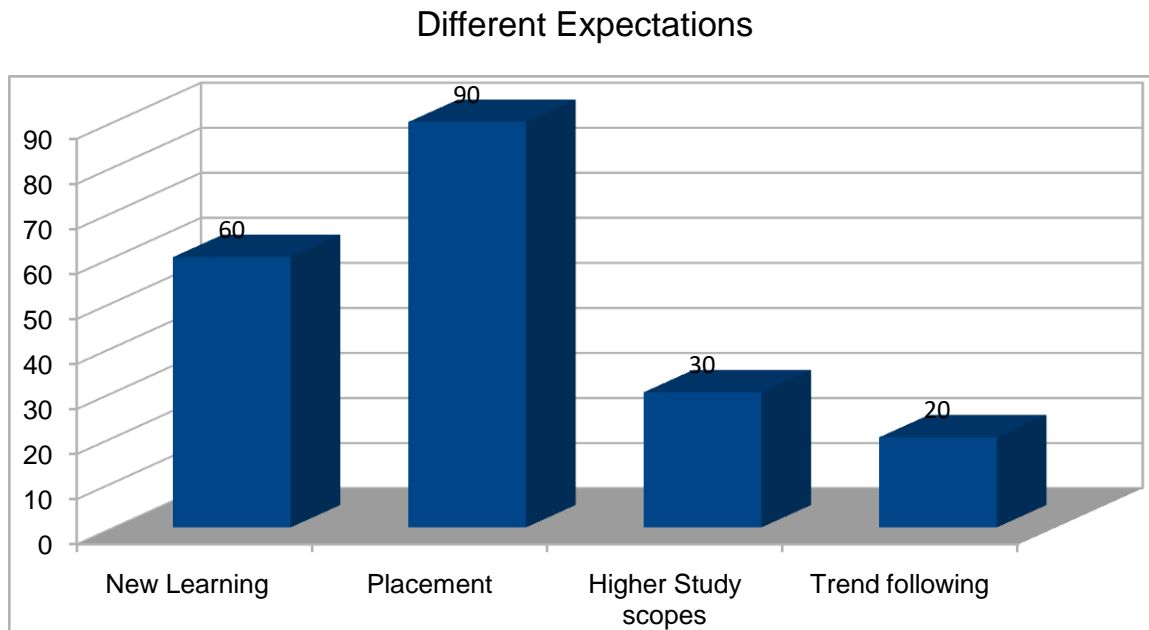
If we look into the curriculum of the courses then we can differentiate the academic and practical parts of the study and also the fundamental difference between a conventional course and a professional course. To analyse it more clearly, let us take an example of the syllabus of a conventional degree course B.Com and a professional UG course BBA (Bachelor of Business Administration):

	Some of the subjects of B.Com		Some of the subjects of BBA
1	Accountancy	1	Principles of Management
2	Business & Corporate Law	2	Management Information Systems
3	Micro & Macro Economics	3	Business Communication
4	Income-tax	4	Marketing Management
5	Statistics	5	Business Environment
6	Business Mathematics	6	Financial Management
7	Financial Management	7	Human Resource Management
8	Auditing	8	Business Economics
9	Cost Accounting	9	Materials Management
10	Corporate Governance	10	Healthcare Management

We can see that the core subjects like Accounting, Law, Business Mathematics and Income tax, Auditing etc. are given priority in the syllabus of B.Com whereas applied subjects like HRM, Marketing, Information System, Healthcare, Production and Material management are taught in BBA course. Some of the fundamental subjects like Economics, Statistics, Management Principles or Mathematics are common in both types of courses. Now after opting for such

professional courses at bachelor degree level, the expectation of the students are supposed to be different from the students of conventional courses.

The survey further helps to identify different segments of expectations amongst the 200 students:



- The significant number (45%) of students are expecting placements and that comes as the major reason behind selecting the courses.
- Whereas 30% of the students wanted to explore something new and thus opted for the courses.
- The expectation of higher studies are surprisingly low (15%) amongst the students whereas it is quite good in reality for the students who are planning for MBA or MCA.
- Majority of the students (45%), when asked, confirmed that they expect a blend of theory and practical knowledge from the courses, whereas 30% of them expects fully practical oriented curriculum.

The Outcome:

After the decision making with lots of expectatons, its important to evaluate the present outcome also. The survey includes some subjective questions (please refer to Annex-I) as well to assess the level of satisfaction of the students in terms of theroitcal and practical exposures.

Following points can be considered as the outcome of the study:

- Lack of In-depth knowledge of core subjects:

A significant amount of students (23%) mentioned that the curriculam and the study process is somehow failing to impart adequate knowledge in the core subjects like: Accounts, Law, Economics, Management Theories, Mathematics, Statistics, Psychology, Sociology etc.

- Insignificant achievement in competetive exams:

This lack of indepth knowledge is directly affecting In the competetive exam (UPSC, PSC, CAT, MAT etc.) results and the students of conventional courses are doing much better in this area.

- Decline in the interst of pursuing research:

The sample of 200 students hardly showed any interst in pursuing research work in their respective fields and it has been observed that their primary intention is to secure a job in the industry. However it is quite possible that few of the students are having the aptitude of research but not properly guided to identify and pursue it.

- Advantage in adaptation in PG studies:

This is one of the positive aspects of these courses as because the students are already introduced to some professional subjects such as Operations Management, Quality Management, Supply

Chain Management, Business Environment, HRM, Marketing, Advertising and Sales, Algorithm, Networking, Database Management.

■ Industry Preference:

Industries like Hotel, Hospital, Banking, Aviation, Logistics etc. always prefer post graduate candidates with a bachelor degree in professional courses as compared to the conventional degree because of better orientation.

■ Direct placement to the Industry right after Graduation:

This is one of the major attraction for the students to get placed into the industry after graduation. They can join at the entry level and gain experience before going for post graduation. However, for long term career, only bachelor degree in any professional degree is not enough.

■ Shortage of Quality Educators:

The colleges are coming up with new professional courses and the response amongst students is also quite good. But the question about the quality of the teachers is raised by the students during the survey.

To teach such industry relevant courses, requirements of highly qualified (preferably PhD) full time teachers are obvious. However most of the colleges are managing the scenario with visiting faculties and under-qualified teachers. This situation is generating dissatisfaction amongst the students and ultimately affecting the quality of the education.

■ Industry relevant courses need Industry exposure:

Though some of the colleges are arranging industrial visits, internship and training programs, almost every participants of the survey demanded for more such activities. As the primary objective of the programmes were to generate quality human resource who will be ready to join the industries, it is very much essential to provide them adequate exposure to respective work

fields before they graduate. This is to achieve a sustainable situation where a significant number of professional graduates can contribute to the industry and also can pursue higher education or research.

Conclusion

Exposure to the plethora of industry oriented syllabi can go a long way in developing the right set of attributes and skills required in job, and all the respective features mentioned above are of great assistance to students aspiring to carve out a lucrative career in the industry. However, an academic course focused on a specific set of traits, is bound to isolate individuals and make them like commodities, demanding a few skill sets, with only some students getting trained and once the demand is fulfilled they are pushed out for a newer demand, there is no complete knowledge since the understanding is limited to a particular domain hence lacking holistic approach of looking at problems. Moreover these attributes divert individuals towards a capitalist need based system with the inherent danger of the process being regulated by the market.

Every progressive society requires a strong blend of professional and research oriented courses. The overpowering dominance of industry oriented programmes across the academic sphere is quite evident. The students also opt for the same looking in terms of career prospects. While the study conducted on a sample size of 200 students revealed a strong inclination towards professional degree programmes and all the cumulative benefits associated with it. But the relevance of conventional degree courses can hardly be denied. Hence it becomes extremely important when we favour one school of thought over another. There should be adequate balance of practical exposure as well as theoretical knowledge for the holistic progress of a student. In case of traditional degree courses the students should choose the course on interest in a particular subject and not on its earning potential. Whereas in Professional degree courses the students choose the curriculum in order to gain detailed knowledge about his area of interest and helps him to build a strong foundation of the career he/she want to pursue. (careerride.com 2013) Students should not fall in the trap of popularity often associated with such courses or any allied academic benefits reaped from it. The ultimate objective of any academic course should be to promote quality learning which contributes to the integrated knowledge development of an individual as well as impart the right set of employment skills for a bright career.

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