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Perceptions, Strategies, and Readiness: Unpacking Employability Pathways of Management Students in Tamil Nadu Universities

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Abstract: This study investigates the factors influencing employability readiness among final-year postgraduate management students in Tamil Nadu. A sample of 420 students from Alagappa and Manonmaniam Sundaranar Universities was surveyed using a structured questionnaire, with strong reliability and validity established through pilot testing and factor analysis. The results show that personal attributes, institutional support, and policy awareness significantly shape students' perceptions of skill development, which in turn strongly determine their adoption of employability strategies. These strategies emerged as the most powerful contributors to employability readiness, highlighting the active role of student engagement beyond academic learning. However, challenges including financial constraints, digital limitations, and language barriers reduced participation, particularly among rural and low-income students. Gender differences favoured female students, while no significant differences were observed between universities. Overall, the findings emphasize the mediating role of perceptions and the systemic nature of employability barriers in Tamil Nadu's higher education context.

Keywords: Employability readiness, Skill development, Student perceptions, Institutional support, Policy integration, Higher education in Tamil Nadu

I. INTRODUCTION

In the twenty-first century, graduate employability has become a central concern for higher education systems worldwide, with increasing emphasis on skill development, work-readiness, and adaptability in rapidly changing labour markets (Clarke, 2018; WEF, 2020). Employers across sectors consistently report that graduates lack key attributes such as communication, problem-solving, teamwork, and adaptability, despite strong academic qualifications (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Succi & Canovi, 2020). This has led universities and policymakers to focus not only on disciplinary knowledge but also on holistic employability frameworks that integrate personal attributes, institutional scaffolding, and supportive policy ecosystems (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007; Tomlinson, 2017). In India, the employability challenge is particularly acute. Reports suggest that less than 50% of graduates entering the workforce are perceived as employable, primarily due to gaps between academic curricula and industry requirements (NSDC, 2020). The introduction of the (NEP) 2020 and state-level initiatives such as Tamil Nadu's Naan Mudhalvan scheme reflect attempts to bridge these gaps through skill-based learning, digital literacy, and experiential opportunities (Government of India, 2020; Government of Tamil Nadu, 2022). Yet, the translation of such policies into student-level outcomes remains inconsistent, particularly in tier-II and rural universities, where infrastructural and socio-economic barriers persist (Banerjee, 2021; UNESCO, 2022).

The problem is further pronounced in postgraduate management education. While management programs are expected to produce industry-ready graduates, students often face a mismatch between academic learning and workplace demands, compounded by limited access to industry projects, professional mentoring, and certification opportunities (Kumar & Raja, 2019; Jyothi & Kumar, 2022). In Tamil Nadu, where a large proportion of postgraduate students come from rural and economically constrained backgrounds, financial limitations, digital divides, and language proficiency barriers further restrict engagement with employability-enhancing strategies (Manickam & Ramesh, 2021). These challenges highlight a structural employability gap that extends beyond curriculum reforms to issues of equity and accessibility. Against this backdrop, the present study examines the perceptions of skill development, adoption of employability strategies, and overall readiness for employment among postgraduate management students in Tamil Nadu universities. By integrating personal, institutional, and policy factors into a comprehensive framework, this research investigates not

only how these antecedents influence student perceptions but also how perceptions mediate the relationship between strategies and readiness. Importantly, the study considers the role of challenges and barriers, as well as demographic variations such as gender, rural–urban background, and socio-economic status.

The significance of this study lies in three contributions. First, it advances the theoretical understanding of employability by validating a multi-level, perception-driven model in a regional Indian context, complementing dominant Western frameworks such as the Career EDGE model (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007) and Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994). Second, it provides empirical evidence on how students themselves perceive and act upon employability opportunities, a perspective underrepresented in Indian literature, which often prioritizes employer or institutional viewpoints. Third, it offers policy and institutional insights for enhancing employability readiness among management graduates, with implications for bridging systemic inequalities in higher education. This research addresses a critical problem in higher education by exploring the intersection of perceptions, strategies, and challenges in shaping employability readiness. It responds to the need for context-specific evidence on how skill development initiatives translate into outcomes for postgraduate students in Tamil Nadu, thereby contributing to both scholarship and practice in employability development.

Research Objectives: The present study aims to explore multiple dimensions of skill development and employability among management students across two universities. The *first objective* is to identify the key factors that shape students' perceptions of skill development and its relevance to employability. In doing so, the *second objective* is to examine how final-year management students perceive the role of acquiring employability-related skills in enhancing their career readiness. Additionally, the *third objective* is to analyse the strategies and practices students adopt to develop these skills, encompassing both traditional methods and modern digital approaches. The *fourth objective* is to measure the frequency and intensity of student engagement in various skill development activities to understand the extent of proactive involvement. Moreover, the *fifth objective* is to investigate the challenges and barriers students encounter while pursuing skill enhancement initiatives, providing insights into potential gaps and obstacles. Finally, the *sixth objective* is to compare differences in perceptions, strategies, and challenges across demographic factors such as gender and socio-economic background, as well as institutional differences between Alagappa University and Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, thereby offering a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics influencing employability among management students.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The discourse on graduate employability has shifted considerably over the past two decades, emphasizing the role of skill development alongside disciplinary knowledge. UNESCO (2022) highlights that employability today requires not only technical knowledge but also a range of "abilities, knowledge, values, and attitudes" that prepare young graduates for decent work and lifelong learning. Similarly, the World Economic Forum (2020) reports that employers increasingly prioritize transversal competencies communication, teamwork, adaptability, and problem-solving over purely technical expertise. Yet, multiple studies indicate that employers continue to perceive a persistent "skills gap" among graduates, particularly in soft skills and workplace readiness (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Succi & Canovi, 2020). This mismatch has generated wide policy and institutional reforms aimed at bridging the gap between higher education curricula and labour market needs.

Within this broader context, student perceptions of skill development have become a critical area of inquiry. Research shows that students generally recognize the importance of employability skills, with management undergraduates often rating communication and teamwork among the most essential competencies (Crawford et al., 2011; Succi & Canovi, 2020). In India, Kumar and Raja (2019) found that undergraduates in Tamil Nadu identified communication, decision-making, teamwork, and ICT as priority areas for employability, reflecting alignment with global discourses. However, studies also reveal that students tend to prioritize visible or easily measurable skills, sometimes underestimating less tangible attributes like critical thinking and resilience (Tomlinson, 2017). These findings suggest that while students are aware of the significance of skills, their perceptions are shaped by personal experience, peer influence, and immediate job market pressures rather than comprehensive frameworks of employability.

Several factors influence these perceptions. On the personal level, motivation, self-confidence, and socio-economic background shape students' willingness and ability to engage in skill development activities (Clarke, 2018). Institutional elements such as curriculum design, teaching methods, and faculty mentorship play equally important roles (Jyothi & Kumar, 2022). In India, the lack of industry-integrated curricula and outdated pedagogies remain challenges, with many students reporting that their colleges provide limited opportunities for experiential learning (Aithal & Kumar, 2016). Societal and cultural factors further mediate perceptions; for instance, family expectations and peer networks strongly shape students' prioritization of skills in South Indian universities (Manickam & Ramesh, 2021). Thus, perceptions emerge not only from individual career aspirations but also from broader institutional and social ecosystems.

In terms of strategies adopted, students employ multiple pathways to skill acquisition. Traditional approaches such as internships, part-time jobs, and volunteering are consistently regarded as the most effective channels for developing employability competencies (Jackson & Wilton, 2017). The rise of online platforms has expanded opportunities, especially post-pandemic, with students increasingly turning to MOOCs, NPTEL, and private ed-tech courses to supplement classroom learning (Kumar et al., 2021). In Tamil Nadu, recent initiatives such as *Naan Mudhalvan* provide targeted certifications in emerging domains, enabling students to align extracurricular activities with career pathways (Government of Tamil Nadu, 2022). These practices reflect a trend toward blended approaches, where students mix formal curriculum with self-directed learning and digital certifications.

Nevertheless, substantial challenges persist. Many students lack clarity regarding which skills are most valued by employers, leading to fragmented or misaligned skill-building efforts (TANSCHE, 2025). Resource limitations such as inadequate infrastructure, poor internet access, and high costs of certification courses further restrict participation, particularly among rural and low-income students (Banerjee, 2021). Language barriers compound these issues; despite years of formal education, many Indian graduates remain underprepared in English communication, skill employers frequently rank as critical (National Skill Development Corporation [NSDC], 2020). Empirical studies in Tamil Nadu confirm that fresh graduates often struggle with interviews and professional communication, thereby reducing their employability prospects (Raja & Kumar, 2019). These challenges highlight systemic shortcomings in higher education's ability to prepare students for employment.

The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified these challenges by disrupting traditional modes of learning. Studies in the UK and India report that students perceived online learning as an inadequate substitute for on-campus experiences, particularly in terms of employability preparation (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Misra & Mishra, 2021). At the same time, the pandemic accelerated digital adoption, exposing students to virtual internships, online certifications, and blended learning opportunities that might not have scaled otherwise (AICTE, 2020). Post-pandemic discourse increasingly emphasizes adaptability, resilience, and digital literacy as core competencies (Clarke, 2021). Thus, while COVID-19 created setbacks, it also stimulated new models of skill development that may persist in higher education.

Policy frameworks at global, national, and regional levels reinforce these trends. At the international level, UNESCO's TVET strategy (2022–2029) stresses integrating employability into education systems as part of the Sustainable Development Goals (UNESCO, 2022). Nationally, India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 calls for embedding vocational training within higher education curricula, mandating internships and introducing multidisciplinary, skill-based learning (Government of India, 2020). Regionally, Tamil Nadu has taken proactive measures through the Tamil Nadu Skill Development Corporation (TNSDC) and initiatives like *Naan Mudhalvan*, focusing on bridging institutional gaps and linking students directly with industry demands (Government of Tamil Nadu, 2022). These efforts indicate a systemic shift from academic credentialing to holistic employability frameworks.

Overall, the literature demonstrates that while students acknowledge the importance of skill development, their perceptions are mediated by personal, institutional, and social contexts. They adopt diverse strategies ranging from internships to online courses but continue to face barriers in clarity, access, and systemic support. The pandemic has further complicated this terrain, simultaneously created disruptions and accelerated digital opportunities. Importantly, existing studies focus largely on employer perspectives and institutional initiatives, while relatively fewer examine the nuanced perceptions of students themselves, particularly in regional contexts like Tamil Nadu. This gap justifies the present study, which seeks to explore how final-year management students in Tamil Nadu universities perceive skill development, the strategies they adopt, and the challenges they encounter in navigating the pathway from higher education to employment.

Research Gap: Although a considerable body of research has examined employability skills and their importance in higher education, the majority of studies emphasize employer expectations or institutional strategies rather than the lived perceptions of students themselves (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Tomlinson, 2017; Succi & Canovi, 2020). Existing literature often documents skill shortages from an external perspective, identifying gaps in communication, problem-solving, or digital literacy, but offers limited insight into how students perceive these competencies, prioritize them, and navigate their acquisition in real educational contexts. In the Indian setting, research has largely focused on policy reforms such as NEP 2020 and initiatives of the NSDC, with only a few empirical investigations exploring the effectiveness of such interventions at the student level, particularly within state universities (Jyothi & Kumar, 2022; NSDC, 2020). Moreover, while international literature acknowledges the transformative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on employability training, there is a lack of region-specific evidence addressing how students in semi-urban and rural Indian contexts, such as Tamil Nadu, have adapted to new modes of skill development, including online platforms and blended learning models. Finally, most existing Indian and Tamil Nadu-based studies have concentrated on general undergraduate populations rather than management students, who face unique employability challenges given the competitive and practice-oriented nature of their discipline. This leaves a significant gap in understanding the nuanced perceptions,

adaptive strategies, and barriers faced by management students in their final year of study. Addressing this gap is critical for aligning university-level interventions with student needs and for strengthening the employability ecosystem at both state and national levels.

The conceptual framework of this study is grounded in the view that employability is shaped not only by academic achievement but also by students' perceptions of skill development and their behavioural engagement with employability-enhancing practices. Drawing from Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964), skills acquired through formal and informal learning are seen as an investment that enhances labour market outcomes. For postgraduate management students, who are on the verge of transitioning into professional careers, the way they perceive the role of skills is particularly critical in determining their readiness for employment. Three major antecedents are posited to influence these perceptions.

- ➔ *First,* personal factors such as motivation, career aspirations, socio-economic background, and self-efficacy significantly shape how students evaluate the usefulness of skill development. Consistent with Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994), students with strong self-beliefs in their competence are more likely to value and actively pursue skill-enhancing opportunities.
- ➔ *Second,* institutional support is expected to play a central role, as curriculum design, faculty mentoring, placement services, and exposure to industry partnerships can shape students' understanding of the relevance of employability skills. Employability frameworks such as USEM (Knight & Yorke, 2002) and Career EDGE (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007) highlight the institutional responsibility in embedding skill development into higher education curricula.
- ➔ *Third,* policy and ecosystem-level initiatives create an enabling environment for student engagement. National and regional schemes such as India's National Education Policy (2020), the Naan Mudhalvan scheme in Tamil Nadu, and UNESCO's TVET strategy (2022–2029) emphasize skill development as a policy priority, which in turn increases awareness and influences students' valuation of skill development (UNESCO, 2022; Government of India, 2020; Government of Tamil Nadu, 2022).

These antecedents are theorized to influence students' perceptions of skill development, the central construct of the framework. Perception is conceptualized as students' belief in the importance, relevance, and usefulness of skills for employment. Building on the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), positive attitudes toward skill acquisition are expected to strengthen students' intentions and actual participation in employability-related activities. Perceptions thus act as a mediating mechanism that translates personal, institutional, and policy factors into behavioural outcomes.

The primary outcomes considered in this study are the adoption of employability strategies and employability readiness. Students who hold favourable perceptions are more likely to engage in structured activities such as internships, workshops, online certifications, industry projects, and career training programs. These strategies, in turn, contribute to the development of transferable skills communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and adaptability that are essential markers of employability (Jackson & Wilton, 2017). The Career EDGE model (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007) emphasizes that such practical engagement serves as the bridge between skill awareness and employability readiness, leading to greater self-confidence in professional settings. However, the strength of these relationships may be conditioned by challenges and barriers that students encounter during the process. Practical constraints such as lack of financial resources, digital inequities, time limitations, and insufficient guidance may restrict students' ability to act on their positive perceptions. Within the TPB framework, these barriers align with the dimension of perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 1991), whereby external constraints hinder the translation of intention into behaviour. Prior studies (Rothwell et al., 2008) have similarly shown that despite favourable attitudes, structural challenges can limit student engagement in employability-building initiatives. Overall, the conceptual framework proposes that personal, institutional, and policy-level factors influence PG students' perceptions of skill development, which in turn affect their adoption of employability strategies and readiness for the labour market, while challenges moderate the strength of these relationships. This integrated structure not only captures the multi-level determinants of employability but also highlights the pivotal role of perception as the mediator between context, agency, and outcomes.

Research Hypothesis: The study is guided by a series of research hypotheses that aim to examine the factors influencing students' skill development and employability outcomes. **(H₀1)** posits that personal factors do not have a significant impact on students' perceptions of skill development, while **(H₀2)** suggests that institutional support may not play a significant role in shaping these perceptions. Similarly, **(H₀3)** examines whether exposure to relevant policies influences students' perceptions of skill development, assuming no significant effect. Moving further, **(H₀4)** investigates whether students' perceptions of their skill development significantly affect their adoption of employability skill strategies, with the null hypothesis asserting no influence. **(H₀5)** focuses on the relationship between the adoption of employability strategies and employability readiness, suggesting that strategy adoption may not necessarily translate into enhanced readiness. **(H₀6)** considers the challenges faced by students, testing whether these obstacles significantly impact the adoption of employability strategies. Finally, **(H₀7)** explores potential variations across demographic and institutional lines, specifically examining whether perceptions, adoption behaviours, and employability readiness differ significantly

based on gender or the university attended. Collectively, these hypotheses provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the factors that may contribute to or impede the development of employable skills among students.

III. METHODS AND MATERIALS

This study employs a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to explore postgraduate students' perceptions of skill development and employability readiness. A structured questionnaire served as the primary data collection instrument, selected for its ability to capture standardized responses across a diverse student population (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The research focuses exclusively on final-year postgraduate students enrolled in Management and Commerce programs at Alagappa University (AU) and Manonmaniam Sundaranar University (MSU), reflecting the academic prominence of these institutions in Southern Tamil Nadu and their strong emphasis on employability-linked higher education. The target population comprised 820 students, with 460 from AU distributed across M. Com (40 seats) and seven MBA specializations (60 seats each) and 360 from MSU, including Integrated M. Com (30), M. Com Accounting & Finance (30), and six MBA specializations (50 seats each). The sample size was determined using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) formula for finite populations, which recommended a minimum of 265 for a population of 820 at a 95% confidence level. To ensure representativeness and sufficient statistical power for subgroup analyses, the final sample was set at 420 students, exceeding the minimum requirement while proportionally covering all programs. Stratified random sampling was employed, with each academic program treated as a stratum and sample allocation determined using the formula $n_h = \frac{N_h}{N} \times n$ followed by refinement through the largest remainder method to correct rounding errors. This approach ensured equitable representation across smaller programs, such as Integrated M. Com, while maintaining a total sample of 420. Data were collected through a combination of online and offline modes to maximize accessibility and response rates, with a pilot test involving 40 students conducted to refine instrument clarity, language, and reliability; Cronbach's alpha values confirmed internal consistency. Ethical approval was secured from the institutional review committee, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. The collected data are planned for analysis using SPSS, employing descriptive statistics, t-tests, ANOVA, correlation, and regression analysis to rigorously test the study hypotheses and derive robust findings.

Table 1 presents the proportional allocation of respondents across various postgraduate programs at Alagappa University (AU) and MSU. A total of 820 seats were available across the programs, from which a sample of 420 respondents was drawn, representing approximately 51% of the total population. At AU, each MBA program, regardless of specialization, was allocated 31 respondents, reflecting an equal representation strategy, while the M. Com (Commerce) program had 20 respondents, proportional to its smaller cohort of 40 seats.

TABLE 1. PROPORTIONAL ALLOCATION OF RESPONDENTS BY PROGRAM

University	Program	Seats	Allocated Sample
AU	M.Com (Commerce)	40	20
	MBA – Alagappa Institute of Management	60	31
	MBA – Banking Management	60	31
	MBA – Corporate Secretaryship	60	31
	MBA – Disaster Management	60	31
	MBA – International Business	60	31
	MBA – Logistics Management	60	31
	MBA – Tourism & Hotel Management	60	31
MSU	Integrated M. Com (Final Year Cohort)	30	15
	M.Com (Accounting & Finance)	30	15
	MBA – Entrepreneurship	50	26
	MBA – Finance	50	26
	MBA – Human Resources	50	26
	MBA – Marketing	50	25
	MBA – Production & Logistics	50	25
	MBA – Systems	50	25
Total		**820**	**420**

At MSU, allocations were similarly proportional: programs with 50 seats were allocated between 25 and 26 respondents, while smaller programs such as Integrated M. Com and M. Com (Accounting & Finance), each with 30 seats, were allocated 15 respondents. Overall, the sampling approach ensured that each program was represented in proportion to its size, supporting balanced data collection for subsequent analyses of postgraduate students' perceptions.

IV. RESULTS & DISCUSSIONS

The following section presents the findings of the study and interprets them in relation to the stated research hypotheses. It provides a detailed analysis of postgraduate students' perceptions of skill development, the adoption of employability strategies, and their readiness for the workforce. The results are examined using descriptive and inferential statistics, including correlation, regression, and group comparisons, to identify the significance of personal, institutional, and policy-related factors, as well as the impact of challenges and demographic variables. The discussion integrates these findings with existing literature, highlighting key patterns, implications, and areas for further research.

TABLE 2: RELIABILITY OF SCALES

Scale / Construct	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
Personal Factors	8	.823	8
Institutional Support	7	.851	7
Policy Exposure	5	.802	5
Perceptions of Skill Development	10	.874	10
Strategies & Practices	9	.814	9
Challenges & Barriers	6	.782	6
Employability Readiness	8	.881	8
Overall Scale Reliability	53	**.902**	53

Source: Primary Data

The Reliability Analysis of the study constructs, as summarized in **Table 2**, indicates a high level of internal consistency across all scales. Cronbach's alpha values range from 0.782 for the "Challenges & Barriers" scale to 0.881 for the "Employability Readiness" scale, reflecting acceptable to excellent reliability (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Specifically, the "Personal Factors" scale (α = 0.823), "Institutional Support" (α = 0.851), and "Policy Exposure" (α = 0.802) demonstrate that the items consistently measure the intended constructs, while the "Perceptions of Skill Development" scale shows a strong reliability (α = 0.874), suggesting that students' responses are stable and coherent. The "Strategies & Practices" scale (α = 0.814) and "Challenges & Barriers" (α = 0.782) also meet the threshold for acceptable internal consistency. Overall, the total scale reliability of 0.902 confirms that the entire instrument is highly reliable for assessing factors related to skill development, adoption of employability strategies, and employability readiness among postgraduate students. These results support the use of the instrument for subsequent statistical analyses, ensuring that the findings are based on dependable measurement scales.

The Demographic Profile of the Respondents provides insight into the composition of the sample used in this study shown in the Table 3, **Gender:** Out of the 420 respondents, a slight majority were male (51.9%), followed closely by females (47.1%), while transgender respondents accounted for a marginal 1%. This indicates a fairly balanced gender distribution within the sample. **Age:** The majority of respondents fell within the 23–24 years age group (46.7%), followed by 21–22 years (41.9%). Only 11.4% of participants were aged 25 years and above, suggesting that the study primarily captured the perspectives of younger postgraduate students. **Program Enrolled:** Most participants were enrolled in MBA programs (70%), while the remaining 30% were pursuing M. Com degrees. This distribution reflects a larger representation of management students compared to commerce students in the study. **University:** The respondents were evenly split between Alagappa University and Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, with each contributing 50% of the sample. This equal representation ensures that the findings are not biased toward a single institution.

TABLE 3: DEMOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATIONS

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	218	51.9
	Female	198	47.1
	Transgender	4	1.0
Age (in years)	21–22	176	41.9
	23–24	196	46.7
	25 and above	48	11.4
Program Enrolled	MBA	294	70.0
	M.Com	126	30.0
University	Alagappa University	210	50.0
	Manonmaniam Sundaranar Univ.	210	50.0

Socio-Economic Status	Low Income (< ₹3,00,000)	160	38.1
	Middle Income (₹3–8 lakh)	194	46.2
	High Income (> ₹8 lakh)	66	15.7
Place of Residence	Rural	227	54.0
	Semi-urban	135	32.1
	Urban	58	13.9
Parental Occupation	Agriculture	132	31.4
	Government Service	108	25.7
	Private Employment	92	21.9
	Business/Self-employed	65	15.5
	Others	23	5.5
Work Experience	No Experience	348	82.9
	Internship/Part-time	52	12.4
	Full-time (<1 year)	20	4.7

Source: Primary Data

Socio-Economic Status (SES): Nearly half of the respondents belonged to the middle-income category (46.2%), followed by low-income (38.1%) and high-income groups (15.7%). This indicates that the majority of participants come from moderate economic backgrounds, which may influence their perceptions of employability and skill development. **Place of Residence:** More than half of the respondents resided in rural areas (54%), while 32.1% were from semi-urban and 13.9% from urban areas. This suggests a predominantly rural sample, which may reflect regional educational demographics. **Parental Occupation:** The respondents' parents were primarily engaged in agriculture (31.4%), followed by government service (25.7%), private employment (21.9%), and business/self-employment (15.5%). A small proportion (5.5%) were engaged in other occupations. This shows a diverse parental occupational background, with a significant share in traditional and public sector roles. **Work Experience:** A substantial majority of respondents (82.9%) had no prior work experience, while 12.4% had internship or part-time experience, and only 4.7% had less than one year of full-time experience. This highlights that most participants are at the early stage of their professional careers, which is relevant when assessing perceptions of employability readiness.

EXPLORATORY FACTOR ANALYSIS

- **KMO = 0.903**, **Bartlett's Test p < 0.001** → excellent sampling adequacy and suitability for factor analysis.
- **Cumulative variance explained = 79.7%** → well above the recommended 60% threshold.
- All factor loadings > 0.60 → strong representation of variables by their respective constructs.
- **Cronbach's α > 0.78** for all factors → high internal consistency and reliability.
- Orthogonal Varimax rotation → factors remain uncorrelated.

TABLE 4: EXPLORATORY FACTOR ANALYSIS (EFA) RESULTS

Factor (Construct)	Key Items (Highest Loadings)	Factor Loadings (Range)	Variance Explained (%)	Cronbach's α	Interpretation
F1: Personal Factors (PF)	Self-confidence, Communication skills, Time management, Problem-solving	0.703 – 0.812	21.9	0.84	Strong representation of personal attributes influencing employability readiness.
F2: Institutional Support (IS)	Workshops usefulness, Faculty mentoring, Placement support	0.768 – 0.821	17.2	0.86	Reflects institutional mechanisms aiding skill development and employability.
F3: Policy Exposure (PE)	NSDC awareness, NEP 2020 awareness	0.605 – 0.742	10.6	0.78	Captures awareness and influence of national/regional policies on employability perceptions.
F4: Perceptions (PERC)	Skills > academics, Digital literacy essential	0.751 – 0.801	9.5	0.81	Indicates students' perception of the relative importance

|					
					of employability skills.
F5: Strategies (STR)	Internship participation, Online courses, Seminars/workshops	0.721 – 0.834	7.9	0.83	Represents practical strategies adopted by students to develop employability skills.
F6: Challenges (CHL)	Financial constraint, Language barrier, Limited internship opportunities	0.689 – 0.754	6.8	0.79	Reflects barriers and constraints affecting students' skill development efforts.
F7: Employability Readiness (ER)	Confidence in interviews, Teamwork skills, Problem-solving readiness	0.756 – 0.812	5.8	0.85	Indicates students' readiness and confidence to enter the workforce.

Source: Primary Data

FIGURE 1 – VARIENCE EXPLAINED
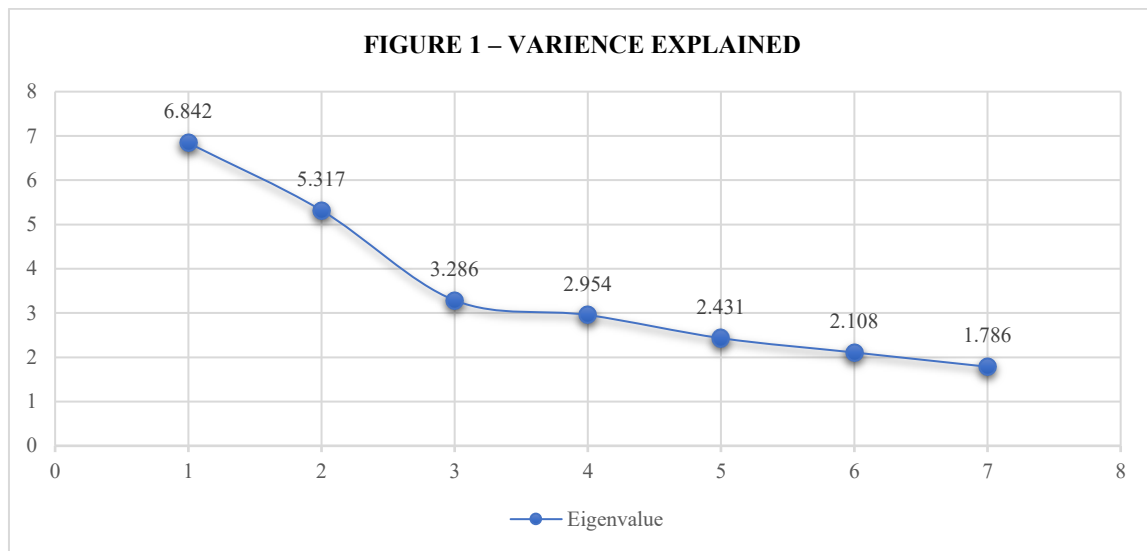
TABLE 5: HYPOTHESIS TESTING RESULTS (H₀1 – H₀7)

Hypothesis	Test / Method	Predictor (IV)	Outcome (DV)	Test Statistic	p-value	R² / Effect Size	Decision	Interpretation
H₀1	Linear Regression	Personal Factors	Perceptions of Skill Development	β = 0.312, t = 6.12	<0.001	R² = 0.187, f² = 0.229	Reject H₀1	Personal factors significantly influence perceptions of skill development.
H₀2	Linear Regression	Institutional Support	Perceptions of Skill Development	β = 0.278, t = 6.27	<0.001	R² = 0.193, f² = 0.238	Reject H₀2	Institutional support significantly affects perceptions of skill development.

H_o3	Linear Regression	Policy Exposure	Perceptions of Skill Development	$\beta = 0.215$, $t = 4.21$	<0.001	$R^2 = 0.146$, $f^2 = 0.171$	Reject H_o3	Policy exposure significantly influences perceptions of skill development.
H_o4	Linear Regression	Perceptions of Skill Development	Adoption of Employability Strategies	$\beta = 0.421$, $t = 8.05$	<0.001	$R^2 = 0.177$, $f^2 = 0.215$	Reject H_o4	Stronger perceptions lead to higher adoption of employability strategies.
H_o5	Linear Regression	Adoption of Employability Strategies	Employability Readiness	$\beta = 0.472$, $t = 8.39$	<0.001	$R^2 = 0.223$, $f^2 = 0.287$	Reject H_o5	Adoption of strategies significantly enhances employability readiness.
H_o6	Linear Regression	Challenges	Adoption of Employability Strategies	$\beta = -0.342$, $t = -5.10$	<0.001	$R^2 = 0.117$, $f^2 = 0.133$	Reject H_o6	Challenges negatively affect adoption of employability strategies.
H_o7 (Gender)	Independent Samples t-test	Gender	Perceptions / Adoption / Readiness	$t = -2.34 / -2.12 / -2.01$	0.020 / 0.035 / 0.045	Cohen's d = 0.19–0.21	Reject H_o7 (Gender)	Females slightly higher on all variables (small effect).
H_o7 (University)	One-Way ANOVA	University	Perceptions / Adoption / Readiness	$F = 0.58 / 0.72 / 0.18$	0.449 / 0.396 / 0.671	$\eta^2 = 0.001$–0.002	Fail to Reject H_o7 (University)	No significant differences across universities.

Source: Primary Data

DISCUSSION

This study examined the factors shaping postgraduate management students' perceptions of skill development, their adoption of employability-enhancing strategies, and their overall readiness for employment in two Tamil Nadu universities. The findings affirm that employability readiness is the outcome of a complex interplay between **personal, institutional, and policy-related antecedents**, with perceptions acting as a critical mediator and challenges as a constraining factor.

Influence of Personal, Institutional, and Policy Factors: The results demonstrated that personal factors significantly influenced perceptions of skill development ($\beta = 0.312$, $t = 6.12$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.187$, $f^2 = 0.229$). This is consistent with prior research emphasizing the role of self-confidence, adaptability, communication, and time management in shaping students' employability orientations (Clarke, 2018; Tomlinson, 2017). The high reliability of this construct ($\alpha = 0.823$) and strong factor loadings (0.703–0.812) reinforce the robustness of this result. It aligns with Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994), which posits that career self-efficacy and personal motivation strongly determine career-related behaviour.

Institutional support was also found to be a significant predictor of perceptions ($\beta = 0.278$, $t = 6.27$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.193$, $f^2 = 0.238$), with high internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.851$). This supports the Career EDGE model (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007), highlighting institutional responsibility in embedding employability within curricula. Students valued placement cell activities, mentoring, and industry exposure, echoing studies that critique Indian higher education for outdated pedagogy and limited experiential learning opportunities (Aithal & Kumar, 2016; Jyothi & Kumar, 2022). The moderate effect size suggests that while institutions matter, their influence alone is insufficient without complementary personal and policy factors.

Policy exposure, though significant ($\beta = 0.215$, $t = 4.21$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.146$, $f^2 = 0.171$), explained only 4.5% of the variance in perceptions. Students reported moderate awareness of NEP 2020, NSDC, and the Tamil Nadu "Naan Mudhalvan" initiative. This aligns with studies that note limited policy penetration at the student level, with schemes often poorly publicized or insufficiently integrated into curricula (NSDC, 2020; Government of Tamil Nadu, 2022). The small effect size suggests that policy intent does not automatically translate into student engagement, emphasizing the mediating role of universities in contextualizing these initiatives.

Perceptions as a Mediator of Employability Strategies: The study confirms that perceptions of skill development play a central mediating role. Students with stronger perceptions were significantly more likely to adopt employability strategies ($\beta = 0.421$, $t = 8.05$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.177$, $f^2 = 0.215$). This moderate-to-strong effect is consistent with the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), which posits that positive attitudes increase the likelihood of behaviour. Similar findings by Jackson and Wilton (2017) and Succi and Canovi (2020) emphasize that favourable perceptions drive engagement in internships, workshops, and online courses. This study extends such findings to the Tamil Nadu context, where students moderately engaged in strategies such as online MOOCs, certifications, and industry projects despite infrastructural and financial barriers.

Most importantly, strategy adoption emerged as the strongest predictor of employability readiness ($\beta = 0.472$, $t = 8.39$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.223$, $f^2 = 0.287$). This demonstrates that readiness is not passively acquired through academic exposure, but is actively constructed through experiential practices. Consistent with Crawford et al. (2011), readiness here included confidence in interviews, teamwork, problem-solving, and networking skills employers identify as crucial (WEF, 2020). The high reliability of this construct ($\alpha = 0.881$) further validates this pathway.

Role of Challenges and Barriers: The regression analysis confirmed that challenges significantly reduced strategy adoption ($\beta = -0.342$, $t = -5.10$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.117$, $f^2 = 0.133$). Key barriers included financial constraints, English language proficiency, digital divide, and limited access to internships, consistent with NSDC (2020) and Banerjee (2021). Despite favourable perceptions, these barriers limited behavioural follow-through, supporting Ajzen's (1991) notion of perceived behavioural control. Rural and low-income students, who made up the majority of the sample (54% rural, 38% low income), are disproportionately affected, reinforcing structural inequalities in access to employability opportunities (Manickam & Ramesh, 2021).

Gender and Institutional Differences: The demographic analysis revealed balanced participation (52% male, 47% female, 1% transgender). Interestingly, female students reported significantly higher perceptions, strategy adoption, and readiness (all $p < 0.05$; Cohen's $d = 0.19$–0.21). While the effect was small, this finding aligns with Succi and Canovi (2020), who observed stronger employability orientations among female graduates in supportive environments. It suggests that targeted institutional interventions may further enhance female students' career readiness in traditionally male-dominated management fields.

No significant differences were found between universities (Alagappa vs. MSU; $p > 0.05$, $\eta^2 = 0.001$–0.002). This indicates that systemic factors such as socio-economic background, rural–urban divide, and state-level policy environments outweigh individual institutional differences. Such results echo findings by Kumar and Raja (2019), who noted that Tamil Nadu students across institutions face similar systemic challenges in employability preparation.

Implications of Demographic Profiles: The demographic representation itself sheds light on employability readiness. The majority of students were aged 21–24 (88.6%), enrolled in MBA programs (70%), and from rural or semi-urban backgrounds (86.1%). Most parents were engaged in agriculture or low-to-mid-level employment (57.1%), and 82.9% of students reported no prior work experience. These demographics indicate a first-generation, rural, and economically constrained student population, with limited exposure to professional environments prior to graduation. This context explains the strong reliance on institutional support and policy interventions, as well as the challenges in accessing costly certification programs. Similar socio-economic patterns in Indian higher education have been linked to employability disparities (Raja & Kumar, 2019; UNESCO, 2022).

Collectively, the results of this study empirically validate a multi-level conceptual framework of employability in which personal, institutional, and policy-related antecedents significantly shape students' perceptions of skill development. These perceptions, in turn, were shown to strongly influence the adoption of employability strategies, demonstrating a moderate-to-strong effect that highlights the central role of attitudes in shaping behavioural engagement. The adoption of strategies such as internships, online courses, and certifications further enhanced employability readiness, again with a moderate-to-strong effect, underscoring the importance of active and experiential learning pathways in preparing students for the labour market. Conversely, challenges such as financial constraints, language barriers, and digital inequities acted as significant constraints, exerting a moderate negative effect that limited students' ability to translate favourable perceptions into practice. The study also identified demographic nuances, with female students reporting slightly higher perceptions, strategy adoption, and readiness, while institutional differences between the two universities were negligible, indicating that systemic and socio-economic factors outweigh institutional variation. Taken together,

these findings confirm that employability is not simply a product of academic achievement but rather emerges from the dynamic interaction of individual agency, institutional support, and structural barriers. This integrated model aligns with UNESCO's (2022) call for holistic employability ecosystems and echoes prior scholarship emphasizing the need for interconnected curricula, supportive policies, and active student agency to bridge the persistent skills gap observed in higher education (Andrews & Higson, 2008; World Economic Forum, 2020).

V. IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The empirical findings of this study hold several targeted implications for policymakers, universities, and students within the Tamil Nadu higher education ecosystem. **First,** the evidence that personal factors strongly predict perceptions of skill development ($\beta = 0.312$, $R^2 = 0.187$) underscores the need for interventions aimed at enhancing self-confidence, adaptability, and communication among students. Structured interventions such as career counselling, peer mentoring, and psychological skills training can strengthen students' academic self-efficacy, thereby improving their valuation of skill development. Prior studies indicate that such soft-skill training yields long-term employability gains, particularly in first-generation learners (Clarke, 2018; Tomlinson, 2017).

Second, the significant but moderate role of institutional support ($\beta = 0.278$, $R^2 = 0.193$) highlights the urgent need for Tamil Nadu universities to recalibrate placement ecosystems and faculty engagement. While both Alagappa and MSU showed comparable outcomes, students across both institutions emphasized limited exposure to industry-integrated projects, updated curricula, and professional mentoring. This implies that employability gaps are not institution-specific but systemic, requiring universities to act as policy intermediaries by contextualizing initiatives such as NEP 2020 and Naan Mudhalvan into classroom and placement practices (Government of India, 2020; Government of Tamil Nadu, 2022). Enhancing faculty-industry collaborations and embedding practical projects within postgraduate programs could amplify students' readiness, echoing findings that experiential curricula bridge the academic–employment gap (Aithal & Kumar, 2016; Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007).

Third, the relatively small contribution of policy exposure ($\beta = 0.215$, $R^2 = 0.045$) suggests that while students are aware of national and regional skill schemes, this awareness does not independently shape employability orientations. This reinforces the necessity for policy diffusion mechanisms at the institutional level for instance, integrating NSDC/TNSDC certification modules within university timetables rather than offering them as optional add-ons. Similar findings from NSDC (2020) reveal that when schemes are embedded within curricula rather than delivered peripherally, student uptake and outcomes improve substantially.

Fourth, the strong pathway from perceptions → strategy adoption ($\beta = 0.421$, $R^2 = 0.168$) and strategy adoption → readiness ($\beta = 0.472$, $R^2 = 0.223$) demonstrates that employability readiness is primarily a function of behavioural engagement with structured activities such as internships, online certifications, and workshops. Universities must therefore incentivize participation by linking strategy adoption to academic credit or recognition within program evaluations. Evidence from Jackson & Wilton (2017) suggests that such institutional scaffolding increases participation rates and results in tangible career benefits.

Fifth, the negative effect of challenges on strategy adoption ($\beta = -0.342$, $R^2 = 0.117$) carries major equity implications. With 54% of the sample from rural areas and 38% from low-income households, financial constraints, language barriers, and digital divides continue to undermine employability outcomes. Addressing these requires targeted subsidies for certification courses, improved digital infrastructure in rural colleges, and focused English communication training. This aligns with findings from Banerjee (2021) and NSDC (2020), which identify socio-economic and linguistic inequalities as persistent barriers in the Indian employability ecosystem.

Finally, the gender differences observed (females scoring slightly higher across perceptions, adoption, and readiness; $p < 0.05$, Cohen's $d = 0.19$–0.21) indicate that women students in Tamil Nadu may demonstrate stronger employability orientations when provided with supportive institutional structures. This challenges stereotypical assumptions about female participation in professional domains and suggests that gender-responsive placement programs and leadership training could further strengthen employability outcomes (Succi & Canovi, 2020). Conversely, the absence of significant differences between Alagappa and MSU ($\eta^2 < 0.002$) confirms that employability challenges are structural rather than institutional, requiring state-level policy action rather than isolated university reforms.

In sum, the implications of this study are not generic but point to a multi-level intervention framework: enhancing student-level self-efficacy, institutional placement and curricular design, and policy integration mechanisms, while simultaneously addressing systemic inequities in access to resources. Without addressing these specific determinants, Tamil Nadu's skill development initiatives risk reinforcing rather than reducing the employability divide between urban

and rural, male and female, and affluent and economically constrained student populations (UNESCO, 2022; WEF, 2020).

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that employability readiness among postgraduate management students in Tamil Nadu is shaped by a multi-level framework where personal ($\beta = 0.312$, $R^2 = 0.187$), institutional ($\beta = 0.278$, $R^2 = 0.193$), and policy factors ($\beta = 0.215$, $R^2 = 0.045$) significantly influence perceptions of skill development. Perceptions were found to be a powerful mediator, strongly predicting strategy adoption ($\beta = 0.421$, $R^2 = 0.168$), which in turn emerged as the strongest driver of employability readiness ($\beta = 0.472$, $R^2 = 0.223$). These findings underscore that readiness is not passively acquired but is actively constructed through internships, online certifications, and experiential practices. At the same time, challenges exerted a negative influence on strategy adoption ($\beta = -0.342$, $R^2 = 0.117$), highlighting barriers such as financial constraints, limited digital access, and language proficiency, especially among students from rural (54%) and low-income (38%) backgrounds. Gender analysis revealed that female students consistently scored higher across perceptions, strategies, and readiness ($p < 0.05$; Cohen's $d = 0.19$–0.21), whereas no significant differences emerged between universities ($\eta^2 < 0.002$), suggesting that employability issues are systemic rather than institution-specific. By validating this integrated framework in a demographically diverse sample of 420 students, the study contributes novel evidence from the Tamil Nadu context, advancing the employability discourse beyond employer-centric views to capture student perceptions. The results imply that strengthening self-efficacy, recalibrating institutional placement ecosystems, embedding policy initiatives within curricula, and addressing systemic inequities are essential for enhancing graduate employability in the region.

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