

Enhancing Employability of Technical Graduate Students

A Point of View



I-Point Consulting Services Pvt. Ltd.

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Over the past 1 year, I-Point has extensively studied the student development & employability readiness models at several leading technical higher education institutions in Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

I-Point has also interacted with several thought leaders and stakeholders of Higher Education sector including Vice Chancellors of Govt & Aided Universities, Chancellors of private Universities & Trustees of Educational Trusts, Directors of Technical Education, Members of Skill/Knowledge commissions, Principals, Deans, Placement & Training Directors, Senior Faculty Members, Senior HR Executives from IT/Retail/Healthcare/Banking corporations and so on.

I-Point also had conducted a structured survey covering 220 stakeholders (including faculty, alumni and current students) to identify key skills and behaviours that are important for effectiveness among polytechnic diploma students.

I-Point has extensively researched the industry expectations & challenges with fresh recruits, in addition to our senior executive's first-hand knowledge about onboarding of freshers into India's most admired corporations.

“Professional Readiness” of Students - by Whom & Why ?

It is now an accepted fact that large number of students who come out of higher educational institutions are “qualified” but not “employable”. These students severely lack in terms of personal effectiveness, organizational readiness and industry readiness. Skill/Knowledge Commissions at national & state levels as well as industry associations like CII, FICCI & NASSCOM have been highlighting the need for educational institutions to focus on “professional readiness” of students instead of just helping them to obtain technical degrees and diplomas.

We witnessed an unprecedented growth of the IT/ITES sector during 2002-2008, which led to severe competition among companies to attract talent. Most of the companies had to accept fresh talent in raw form and invest heavily into training to inculcate professional skills & behaviours. Thus the onus of fresher development got assigned to the hiring companies during this boom period.

With the turning of economic cycles, the expectations are changing, and mature hiring conditions are emerging. The Indian economy will continue to grow faster than rest of the

Institutions Surveyed

- 2 Govt (Aided) universities and 1 NIT
- 3 (deemed) Universities
- 6 Autonomous Engineering Institutions
- 20+ non-autonomous engineering institutions
- 6 Polytechnics (3 Govt, 2 Aided, 1 Private)

world, but companies are going to have better choices while hiring freshers; they will focus on getting students from respective technical streams (rather than from all disciplines), and will prefer students who have been trained to be “production ready”.

The debate about who is responsible for “professional readiness” of students seems to be settled - at least for the time being - with the onus clearly on the Educational Institutions.

Students have already recognized the need to focus on self-development along with mainstream technical studies. The expectation on institutions to identify and address their developmental needs will only grow in the years to come.

Quality and depth of non-technical programs, towards holistic development of students will be a significant factor in attaining leadership positions in the higher education industry, which is getting more competitive by the day. Several institutions have taken firm, positive steps in this direction.

Is There A Road Map To Follow ?

Several institutions we talked to, expressed lack of clarity about what kind of student development programs to offer at what point in time. Some of the recurring questions were

- What are the different areas of professional development for students ?
- Assuming student development should focus on systematic progression in competencies, is there any sequence to follow ?
- How should such a sequence be aligned with the academic semester progression ?

What are the Delivery Models ?

We came across a variety of delivery models being tried out by institutions for student training & development initiatives. The key findings were :

- Such programs are most effective when delivered in person, at campus.
- Programs are most effective when delivered in smaller batches, with high experiential learning content.
- Students rated developmental feedback as the highest expectation from such programs. Continuity (and familiarity) of faculty also was an important expectation, especially in this background.
- 100% offline programs (CBT/internet based) are not effective and not considered as value for money. We also observed that internet access and proficiency for students vary widely between rural and urban areas, thus impacting consistency and reach of such programs.
- Weekend/Vacation programs are not appreciated and are not considered to be serious initiatives.
- Students and faculty strongly prefer developmental programs to be part of the academic schedule because it follows a discipline, and also reflects seriousness of college management.
- Crash courses (run across multiple days) are considered to be too heavy and most of the learnings get lost without opportunity to assimilate and apply.

Finding Time For Student Development Programs

Finding time to roll out any additional programs seems to be a universal challenge with institutions. Prima facie, this is not surprising, considering the heavy syllabi & credits compliance demanded by governing bodies and affiliated universities.

However, on closer examination we found that several opportunities exist for institutions to optimize their academic schedules, to incorporate additional programs. Proactive planning and close coordination with each department are the keys to accomplish this.

We also found that, contrary to popular belief, several autonomous as well as non-autonomous institutions have successfully implemented calendars for campus-wide coverage of such programs.

Finding time is a matter of conviction and proactive planning; achieving quality and consistency seems to be the real challenge.

Scheduling Options

We found a wide range of schemes already being followed by institutions for student development programs :

- 4 to 8 hours per week from 1st to 6th semesters, for every student
- 3 consecutive days per semester on different days for each section, from 3rd to 7th semesters
- 6 consecutive days per year, for all sections (same days for entire college) in 5th semester
- 3 days of industry sponsored programs for large sized batches (multiple programs) in 5th semester
- 18-weeks' IT finishing school program across 6th and 7th semester
- 6-8 hours per week of English proficiency sessions during 1st and 2nd semesters, for all students
- 1 afternoon lab per week per student during 3rd or 4th semesters, different days for each section
- 5 consecutive days per student during 5th or 6th semesters, different days for each section
- 12 sessions per semester for all students, from 2nd to 7th semesters

The Scalability Aspect

A large number of aspiring educational institutions are located in the Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities. With professional trainers & consultants concentrated in the big metros, these institutions are severely constrained in rolling out developmental programs for students, despite best intentions and efforts. As a result they are being forced to adopt sub-optimal programs and delivery models.

The training & development sector is currently dominated by freelancing consultants. Absence of organizations with ability to scale up using intellectual property & packaged service offerings is severely impacting quality & consistency of programs being offered at institutions. We found that pioneering institutions are keen to build long term professional, service-based relationships with specialist organizations instead of relying on large number of individual freelancers.

The Affordability Aspect

The question of affordability (for students as well as the institutions) is paramount in everyone's mind. At the same time we observed that students' affordability is more of a mindset, towards seeking reassurance for value for money.

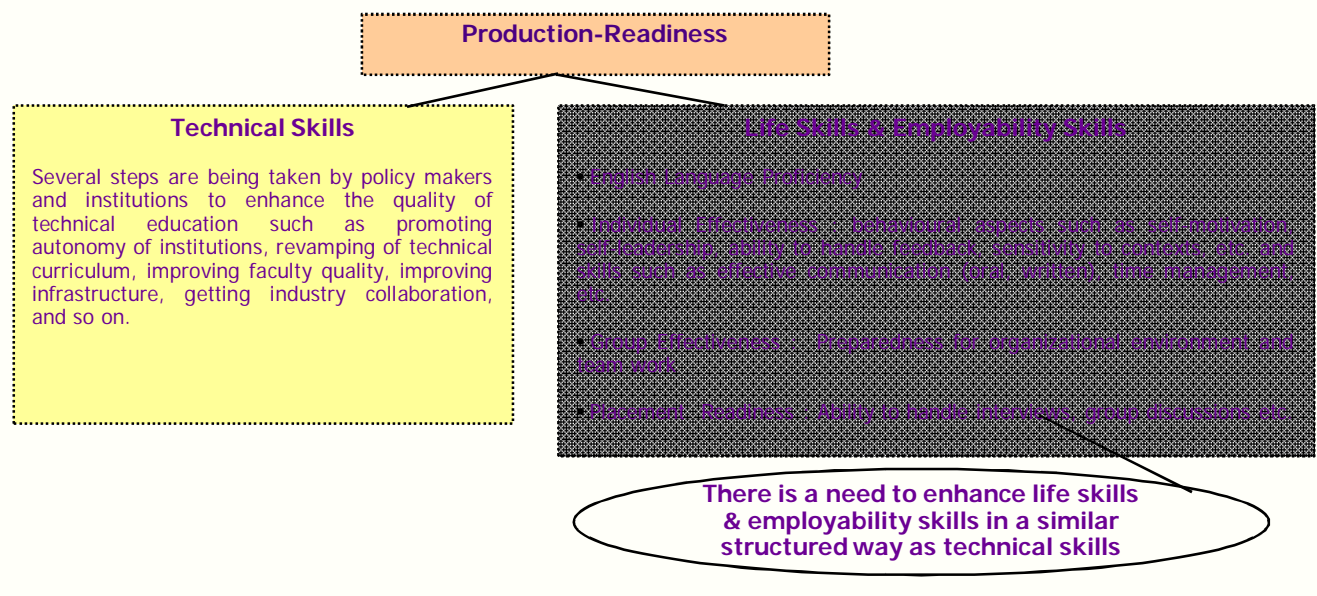
We found that majority of the students seek assurance from the institution, seniors and parents (in that order) to determine value of any training & coaching programs being offered to them. In that sense, the onus is on the institutional management to choose the programs, delivery partners and articulate the rationale and benefits to the students.

We also found that all students would like to see the entire fees to be declared in advance and collected at single point, by the institution. Their comfort and trust levels goes down when any 'additional' fees are collected during the semesters. Almost all students agreed that institutions may decide on developmental fees upfront and include in the overall fees with a formal communication about the same.

We also noticed that institutions have the option of charging fees across an extended period, which is highly welcomed by the students.

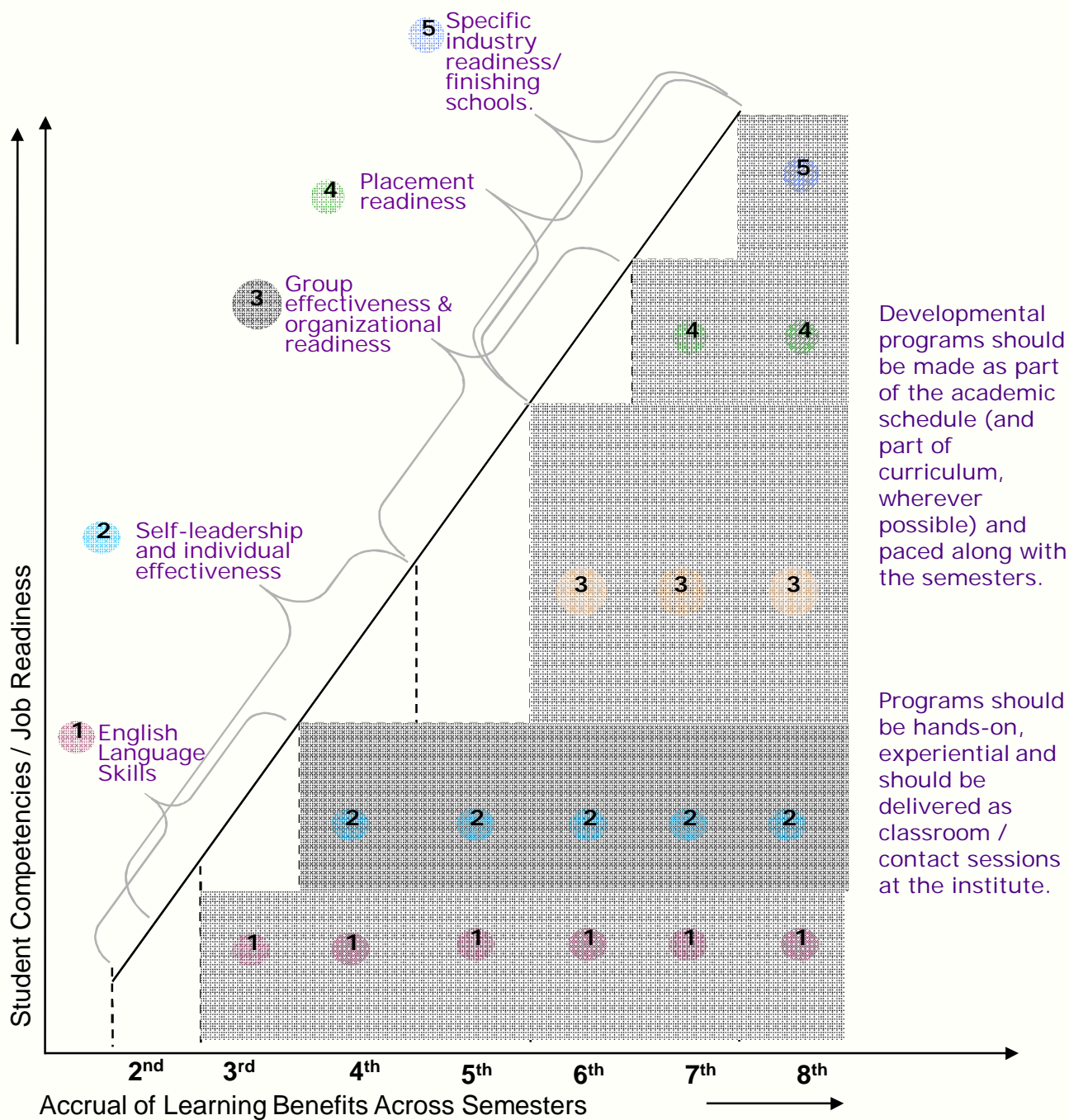
Our Point of View

There is a dire need to enhance employability skills & professional-readiness of students in technical education institutes.



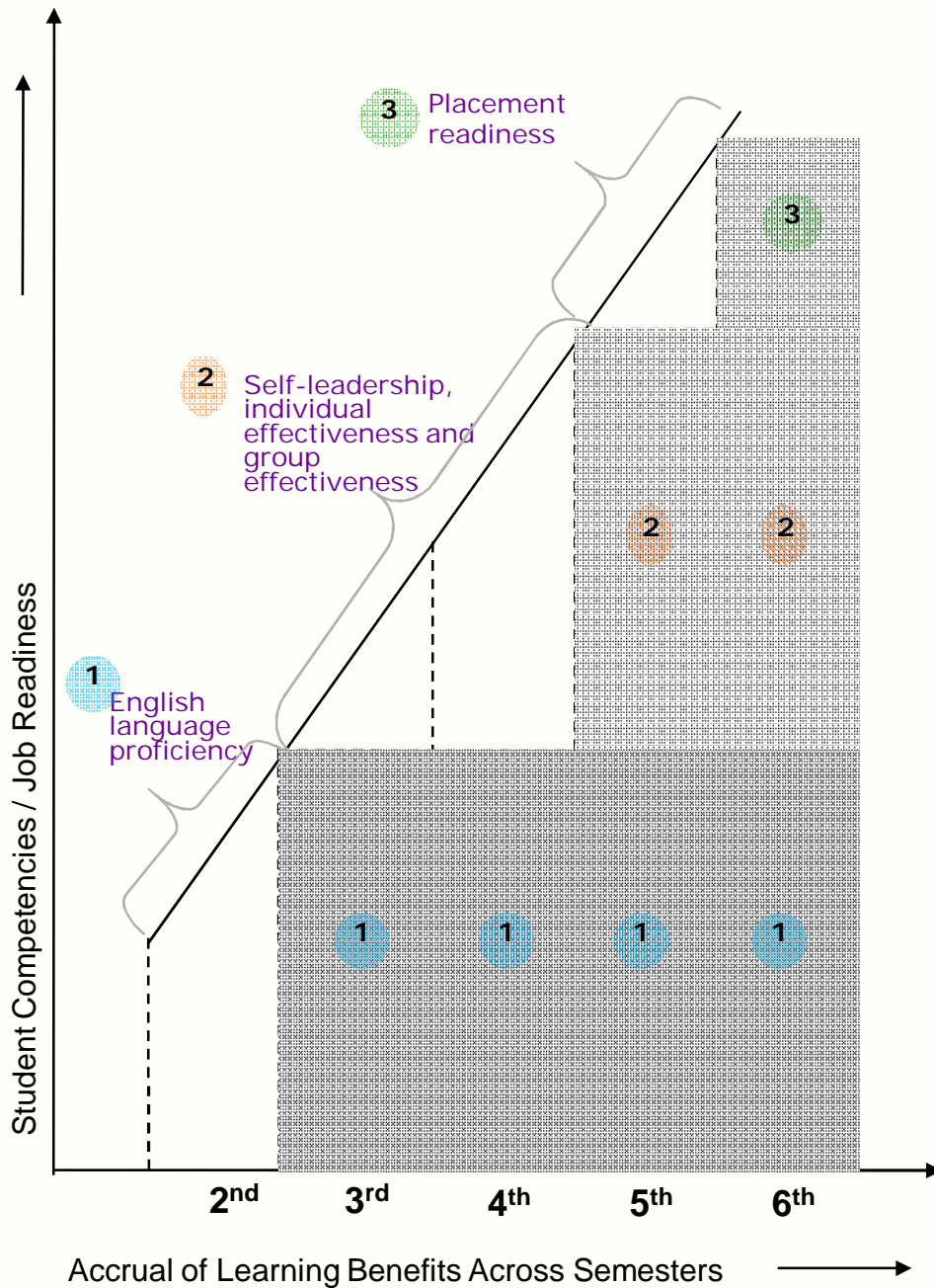
Developmental Road Map For Engineering Students

I-Point recommends a structured competency development roadmap for Engineering students from 2nd to 7th semesters, covering dimensions of English Language Proficiency, Individual Effectiveness, Group Effectiveness, Placement Readiness and Industry-Readiness, in that order.



Developmental Road Map For Diploma Students

I-Point recommends a structured competency development roadmap for Diploma students over the course of 2nd to 6th semesters, covering English Language Proficiency, Individual Effectiveness & Group Effectiveness, and Placement Readiness, in that order.



Developmental programs should be made as part of the academic schedule (and part of curriculum, wherever possible) and paced along with the semesters.

Programs should be hands-on, experiential and should be delivered as classroom / contact sessions at the institute.

Recommendations

- Developmental programs should ideally be included as part of the curriculum, wherever possible (e.g : universities and autonomous institutions). Our experience indicates that inclusion in curriculum brings a positive and serious outlook among staff, students as well as outside stakeholders.
- In all cases, the programs should be scheduled and run alongside other technical subjects of the curriculum. They should be spaced through the duration of the semesters, rather than being conducted as crash courses.
- Inclusion into academic schedule (and curriculum) should be done through prescribed process of approvals included board of governors, board of studies, academic council, senate etc.
- The programs should be run as experiential labs, with maximum number of hands-on, real life exercises and assignments for the students to practice. Sessions should be facilitated, rather than lecture based.
- The programs should be run in a contact-session / classroom delivery mode, for maximum effectiveness. In certain cases (e.g : industry-specific/IT skills training) a healthy mix of contact and internet-based learning sessions can be followed.
- The institution may customize the roadmaps as per student demographics and specific requirements. For example, the English proficiency aspects may be waived if the students are predominantly from Urban background. However campus-wide rollout of Individual Effectiveness Programs should be mandatorily done during the early semesters, with all students from all branches going through same program.
- The institution can leverage a mix of own resources, professional firms and corporate MOUs to rollout the entire roadmap
- Identify and encourage professional service firms to deliver such developmental programs, to ensure high quality and scalability. If the right steps are taken now by policy makers and industry leaders, market forces will evolve and scale up to handle large volume of students and geographical spread of institutions within a couple of years.
- Establish long term relationships between institutes and professional service firms to ensure continuity of service, and to sustain high quality.
- Encourage & empower institutions to tap into all available financial resources and also to choose appropriate funding models including joint funding by institutions and students - this will increase affordability while ensuring that students view these programs with the right degree of seriousness.
- Collect the fees for these programs as part of the semester / yearly fees. Publish the fees and articulate the decision to students, in advance.
- Collect the fees over the duration of several semesters in small, affordable instalments, to reduce the financial load on students.

About I-Point (www.i-point.co.in)

I-Point Consulting Services Pvt, Ltd. ("I-Point") specializes in Competency Development Programs and Services. I-Point programs are designed to enhance individual competencies, and then to apply them in business environments, combining the disciplines of profiling, coaching, simulation and assessment techniques. I-Point programs caters to the needs IT, Banking & Higher Education sectors and covers Entry, Middle and Senior level competencies.

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