

# **Managing Employability Skills at the Early Career Stage The Indian Apparel Industry: A case study**

**Keywords:** employability / early career expectations / student aspirations

## **Abstract**

*The Indian Apparel Industry was previously driven raw materials and physical output. At present, due to changes in the global environment, it is turning into an industry being driven by ideas, services and innovation. This has led to fundamental changes in the market and an increased demand for training and higher education.*

*This paper analyzes employability skills from the points of view of employers, educators, graduates and current students. It explores avenues for effective skills delivery and transferability into the work environment. Primary research was conducted through interviews and questionnaires. The results were analyzed and focus group discussions were held to get further insights into the situation and possible solutions.*

*The findings show that the delivered skill and aspiration set of the graduate does not match with the early career stage requirements of the employers in this industry. The analysis indicates that the graduate employability skill set should not be led by employer requirement but a combination of employer priorities, educator aims and graduate aspirations. This paper proposes an employability skills model that is agreed on by a working party of stake holders (employers, academics, and graduates) and an Employability Skills Development Cycle which can be used as a tool to continuous updating. It also suggests that effective early stage career management may be enhanced through regulation of student expectation management by HE institutions.*

*Extensive research has been already been done on employability skills. These studies are primarily from the points of view either of the employer or higher education (HE) institutes. This paper looks at both of these along with graduate aspirations which have not been studied before. At the same time this paper focuses on employability in the Fashion Industry where existing data is scanty. In a future study the role of HE as an employability environment enabler may be further explored as a tool to enhance employability fit.*

## **1.0 Introduction**

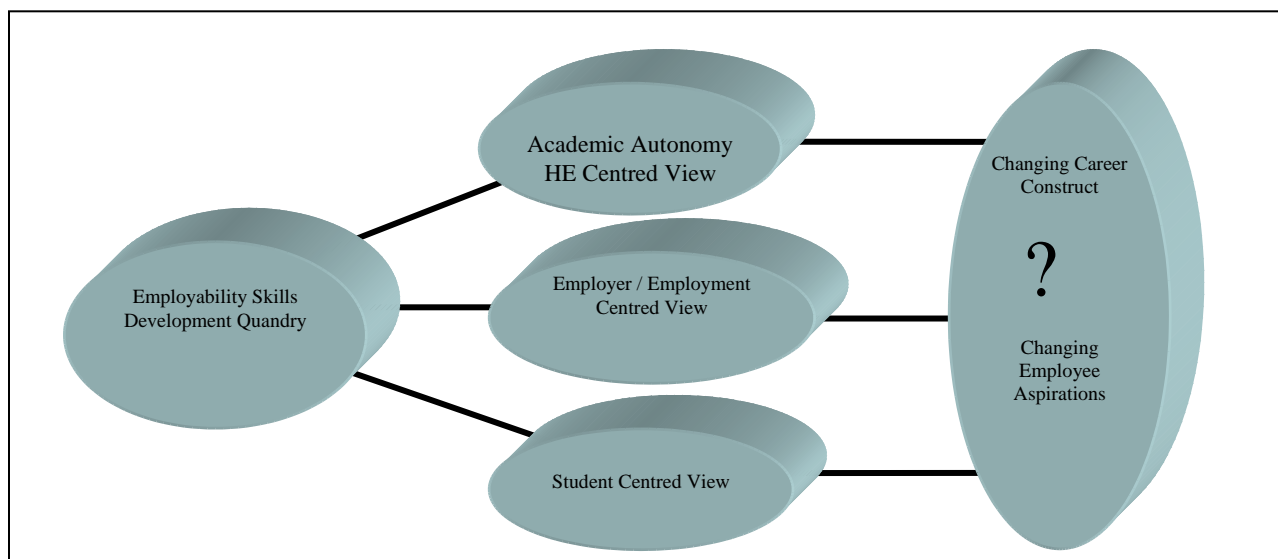
Employability skills are the skills required not only to gain employment but also to progress within an enterprise so as to achieve ones potential and to contribute successfully to the enterprise's strategic direction<sup>1</sup>. Thus employability skills are not task related but rather linked to

a graduate's capacity to perform and advance within a particular firm's operative strategic direction<sup>2</sup>.

There are four strands of literature which look at developing employability skills during the workplace: self insight, self efficacy, and self determination<sup>3,4</sup>, learner motivation and capability<sup>5</sup>, social capital theory, learning and feedback culture<sup>6</sup>. These have been reviewed to see whether these skills may be developed from the Higher Education Setting itself

### 1.1 Differing Views of Employability

While studying employability skills it becomes evident that each stakeholder has his view on employability keeping his priorities in mind. Within the changing construct of employee aspirations and career growth patterns there is confusion among HE institutes as to whose viewpoint to prioritize (fig 1).



**Figure 1.** Employability Quandry. Source: Author

#### 1.1.1 Employability Skills – The Higher Education Centred View

In 1997, Harvey et al stated that embracing employability could infringe academic autonomy, undermine critique and result in a shift of balance away from education towards training. Training has a short shelf life. It is deemed more important that graduates have a range of attributes that empower them as life long learners.<sup>7</sup> Higher education often takes a view that highly employable people need understanding, skills of various kinds, efficacy beliefs and

metacognitive fluency<sup>8</sup>. This view of employability prioritizes pedagogy. It is compatible with descriptions of good learning in general and is not just to do with learning in, about and for work.

### **1.1.2 Employability Skills – The Employer / Employment Centered View**

One view point is that Employability is about making closer links between education and the employer. Employers are increasingly interested in what higher education has to offer, both for recruitment purposes and as a source of part time training and development for their existing employees (for example Li & Fung, India Ltd / GAP International Sourcing Ltd have developed short and long term continuing education modules that are delivered to their employees by HE).

At the same time higher education institutes internationally are reaching out to their various communities, collaborating with employers, and developing innovative and successful ways of enhancing student employability. Increasingly institutions are aware of the need to develop a long term integrating strategy for employability that maximizes links with employers and embeds employability in the curriculum.

### **1.1.3 Employability Skills – The Student Centered View**

Another point of view is that employability may be considered to be the property of an individual: the propensity of a graduate to obtain and retain fulfilling work.<sup>9</sup> Today graduates are more concerned about their skills competencies, future roles, and opportunities for self determination than they are about most other areas of work experience.<sup>10</sup> Keeping this in mind educators should not be interested in graduates just getting jobs. Institutes of higher education should train graduates for life.<sup>11</sup>

### **1.2.1 Careers – the Dynamic Environment**

The concept of career is undergoing a massive change. To secure and maintain a stable workforce, companies rely on predictable behavior built around stable organizational and occupational institutions. In recent years however the comfortable accommodation between organizations seeking a stable workforce and individuals seeking a secure career has been disrupted. New mobile careers are interorganizational and to an extent interoccupational.<sup>12</sup> This version of the employment contract fosters the independence of workers from organizations through employability.

### **1.2.2 Careers - Employee Aspirations**

In the past there were traditional linear career paths. Today alternative metaphors such as hopping from job to job or climbing on a jungle gym describe careers. Individual boundary-less career behavior is characterized by marketability outside of the present employer, interfirm mobility, extra-organizational networks, extended employability and subjective rather than objective criteria of success.<sup>13</sup>

There are also potential inconsistencies between desired attributes and skills. For example integrity and loyalty may prove incompatible in some situations. Also qualities such as initiative and enterprise may conflict with loyalty and cooperative team work.<sup>14</sup> Market relationships are increasingly impersonal. There is a feeling that if employers wish for psychological commitment and loyalty they should earn it.<sup>15</sup>

## **2.0 Treatment of Employability within the curriculum**

There are three main aspects of the employability agenda. They are, developing students attributes (designed to make them employable), developing students self presentation skills (designed to improve their recruitment chances), developing student's flexibility and willingness to continue learning (designed to ensure that they continue to be employable).

### **2.1 Curricular best practices in employability as shown in College Websites**

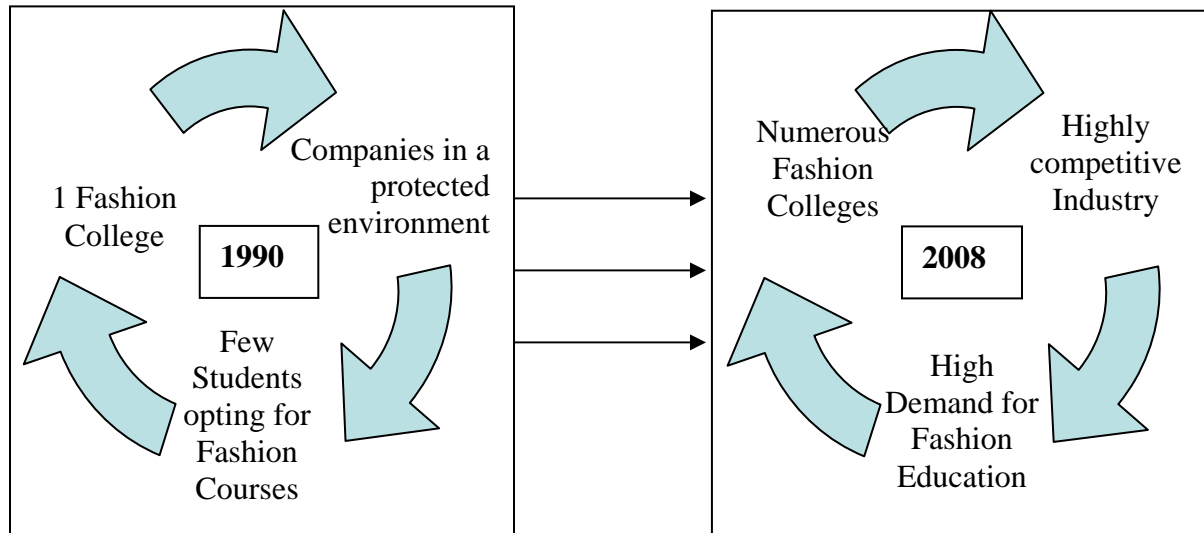
Appendix 1 shows the employability focus of some universities as described in their web sites. The areas that institutes work on can be divided into four broad types:

- enhanced career services
- embedded attribute development within the programme of study – reviewed curriculum to include employer inputs or make attribute development explicit
- innovative provision of internship opportunities
- reflection and recording of experience, attribute development and achievement alongside academic abilities by using progress or PDP files

## **3.0 The Indian Perspective – setting the context - servicing the Apparel Industry**

In the 90's the Apparel Industry in India was unorganized in nature. There was a near monopoly of colleges that trained graduates in the area of Fashion Merchandising and Management. Colleges focused on subject and technical skills delivery. The knowledge carried by the graduates made them very special and employers were willing to pay a premium for their

services. Graduate expectations were usually met leading to long standing, mutually beneficial relationships between employer and employee. Educators found that the value they provided was more than adequate for a win-win situation. (fig 2.)



**Figure 2.** Environmental Shift in the Fashion Industry and Fashion Education in India. Source: Author

### 3.1 Current Scenario

Today this has all changed. Global sourcing of apparel has become increasingly competitive in nature. Buyers are rationalizing their vendor base, developing strategic relationships with suppliers, shifting from fragmented sourcing to “full package” suppliers and outsourcing more of their operations. Businesses are struggling to stay competitive and attitudes of employers are changing.

1. Indian exporters who were used to competing with each other for orders (due to quota restrictions) are now competing with exporters in China, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh.
2. International brands have opened sourcing offices to manage their business in India
3. International Brands have entered India for direct retailing.

All this meant that companies have had to restructure themselves and professionalize in order to survive and compete globally.

In the social context, graduate aspirations have shifted from the traditional areas of medicine and engineering to areas of individual interest and commerce. More and more students are found to be entering professions of their choice such as Fashion Merchandising, Fashion Design and Apparel Manufacturing. Within the changing environment colleges offering courses

imparting vocational and technical training found a huge jump in demand both from the candidates who wanted to study there and from employers who needed trained professionals and were willing to pay the extra amount required to employ them. Colleges transited to HE as a result.

Today's graduates no longer merely want a 'job'. They are increasingly aware of what their capabilities are and would like an opportunity to use these to the maximum. They are also keen to be the driving force in their job selection and have a much clearer idea as to what kind of companies they would like to work in. One of the main reasons cited for the lack of market responsiveness among professional education courses in India is the limited or no participation of the industry in contributing to curricular development.<sup>16</sup> It is the industry that has to finally employ the trained graduates. Hence their mandate in determining what their future employees need to be taught can hardly be over emphasized.

### **3.2 Indian Government – Employability Skills Agenda**

The Government of India has realized the importance of employability, employability skills and their relationship with HE, VT and VE. The following quotations show clearly that there is a directive towards emphasizing employability through education:

The former president of India, a distinguished educationist remarked

“College and university education generating researchers and professional entrepreneurs is important. The whole purpose of education in a country like India is to develop and enhance the potential of our human resources and progressively transform it into a knowledge society. In the Knowledge economy the objective of a society changes from fulfilling the basic needs of all round development to empowerment. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century India needs large number of talented youth with higher education for the task of knowledge acquisition, knowledge imparting, knowledge creation and knowledge sharing. There is a large gap in the availability of employability skills. How to bridge the gap is the question we need to address.”

Dr APJ Abdul Kalam, 2006

The Prime Minister followed thus:

“We will need to ensure far greater availability of educational opportunities at the higher education level so that we have not just a literate youth but a skilled youth, with skills which can fetch them gainful employment.”

Dr Manmohan Singh, 2007

#### **4.0 Objectives**

During 2007, research was undertaken in the Business & Technology Department of the Pearl Academy of Fashion. This department delivers a 4yr BA (Hons) in Fashion Merchandising and Production as well 2 yr PG Programmes in two disciplines: Merchandising and Garment Manufacture. The research was driven by agonizing experiences in 2005 and 2006 which revealed a hiatus between graduate and employer perspectives on employability issues. The research design was based on primary data generated through interviews and questionnaires. The schedule for interviews was open ended and for questionnaires was close ended. (details of respondents are available in Annexure II)

*The objective of this paper is to draw on the findings of this research and to assess the employability skills priorities of the various stakeholders in the context of the Apparel Industry in India. This paper also aims to reflect on the role of Higher Education Institutions in facilitating the inculcation of the same. Specific research questions being examined are:*

- Who should set the mandate on employability skills in the apparel industry – student? employer? educator?
- What is the fashion industry's rating of key employability skills at the early career stage?
- Is there dissonance in the understanding between stakeholders regarding employability skills in today's dynamic workplace environment?
- Do educators have a role to play in bridging the gap between student aspirations, educator ideals and employer expectations?
- How can the gap be bridged?

## 5.0 Findings

### 5.1 Importance of employability skills

All 41 employers interviewed said that employability skills are of KEY importance to work in the apparel industry today. The following are a few quotations from the interviews with senior management in the organizations.

“Subject knowledge is a part of the graduate, but the product must be balanced”

“Attitude is important. Attitude to life. Attitude to work”

“Subject skills can always be refined.”

“Students need to have a learning attitude, honest, down to earth”

“Key words are energy, talent, motivation and commitment”

“Adaptability, sharp, positive”

### 5.2. Candidate Selection - Background

When asked what kind of entry level qualifications are preferred during the selection process it was found that employers prefer to employ people with at least one year experience. Between graduating students from professional fashion institution and the ones from other streams their preference was for the former. The reasons cited for this preferences was that candidates who have worked for a year are *more aware of what is expected from them at the work place and more prepared for the work environment dynamics* than students straight out of college. Also to be noted is the viewpoint that fresh graduates from professional colleges “*tend to have unrealistic expectations of the workplace*”.

### 5.3.Candidate Selection – Source

The most used method of recruitment in the apparel industry in India were reported to be, in descending order:

- a. Word of mouth
- b. Placement agent
- c. Campus Placement
- d. Advertisement



Through word of mouth the employer appeared to be able to pre-assess the students based on what they have learnt about their work *attitudes* and *abilities*, whereas when they come to the campus for placement they are not able to make that judgement since placement offices in HEs tend to present all students equally to them.

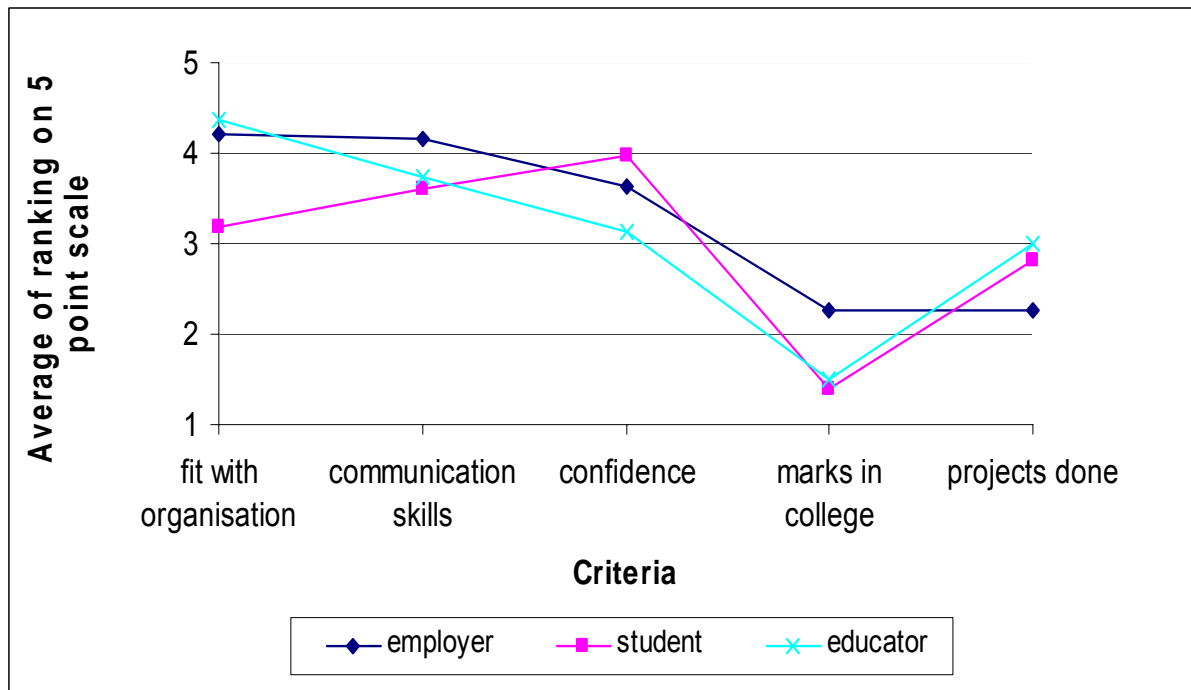
#### 5.4. Key Drivers for Employee Selection

The *key drivers* for selecting a junior employee in merchandising or production at an interview either at the campus or elsewhere are in order of preference:

*Employer results:*

1. Fit with the organization (4.21)
2. Communication Skills (4.16)
3. Confidence (3.63)
4. Grades achieved in college (2.26)
5. Projects done during College (2.26)

The paranthesised numeric which represents the average of ranking attached to the qualifier by the respondents on a 5 point scale where 1=least important and 5=most important. An emphasis on the first two qualities is clearly visible.



**Graph 1.** Key Drivers for employee selection from the perspective of various stakeholders

It can be seen from the above graph that students and teachers have a reasonably good idea about what the employer is looking for during the selection process. This correlates with the viewpoint of the employers that they are overall satisfied with the generic and subject skills of candidates that they interview for employment.

### 5.5. Junior Employee Skill Priorities

This section describes what the employer is looking for in a junior employee and what the other stake holders (educators, students) *think* the employer is looking for. The *skill set* used was taken from Cotton (2002).

Priority	Employer Priorities	Educator view of Employer Priorities	Student view of Employer Priorities
1	<b>Positive attitude (A)</b>	<i>Problem solving (H)</i>	<b>Oral communication (B)</b>
2	<b>Honesty (A)</b>	<b>Self discipline (A)</b>	<i>Problem solving (H)</i>
3	<b>Conscientiousness (A)</b>	<b>Positive attitude (A)</b>	<b>Positive attitude (A)</b>
4	<b>Interpersonal skills (A)</b>	<b>Conscientiousness (A)</b>	<b>Conscientiousness (A)</b>
5	<b>Self confidence (A)</b>	<i>Decision making (H)</i>	<b>Interpersonal skills (A)</b>
6	<b>Dependability (A)</b>	<b>Dependability (A)</b>	<i>Decision making (H)</i>
7	<b>Enthusiasm (A)</b>	<i>Creative thinking (H)</i>	<b>Dependability (A)</b>
8	<b>Self discipline (A)</b>	<b>Honesty (A)</b>	<b>Adaptability (A)</b>
9	<b>Oral communication (B)</b>	<b>Oral communication (B)</b>	<b>Reading (B)</b>
10	<b>Reading (B)</b>	<b>Interpersonal Skills (A)</b>	<i>Learning skills (H)</i>
11	<i>Learning skills (H)</i>	<b>Enthusiasm (A)</b>	<i>Creative thinking (H)</i>
12	<i>Problem Solving (H)</i>	<b>Self confidence (A)</b>	<b>Self confidence (A)</b>
13	<b>Adaptability (A)</b>	<b>Adaptability (A)</b>	<b>Enthusiasm (A)</b>
14	<i>Creative thinking (H)</i>	<i>Learning skills (H)</i>	<b>self discipline (A)</b>
15	<b>Arithmetic skills (B)</b>	<b>Ability to work without supervision (A)</b>	<b>Ability to work without supervision (A)</b>
16	<b>Personal Appearance (A)</b>	<b>Reading (B)</b>	<b>Honesty (A)</b>
17	<b>Writing (B)</b>	<b>Writing (B)</b>	<b>Personal Appearance (A)</b>
18	<i>Decision Making (H)</i>	<b>Personal Appearance (A)</b>	<b>Arithmetic skills (B)</b>
19	<b>Ability to work without supervision (A)</b>	<b>Arithmetic skills (B)</b>	<b>Writing (B)</b>

**Table 1.** Different Perspectives of Employer Priorities between stakeholders

Note: 1) B – Basic Skills, H – Higher Order Skills, A – Affective Skills

2) Skills rated above individual stake-holder mean have been displayed in **bold**

3) *Higher order skills have been italicized*

Source: Author's research

It can be noted that employers responded with the highest ratings for affective skills. In the group of skills falling rising the mean rating, 8 skills were affective and one was a basic skill. Not a single higher order skill had been rated above mean.

On analysing the educator's imagination of employer's wants it can be seen that all but one higher order skill lay above their mean; and, in turn, when students are asked what employers are looking for in a junior employee they have rated all Higher order skills above their mean .

### 5.6.1 Student understanding of Employer Priorities

Table 2 reorganises the data in the previous table ranking the perception of a select pair of stakeholders: employers and students.

Attributes	Employer Rank	Student Rank of Employers Perception
Honesty	2	16
Self confidence	5	12
Self discipline	8	14
Problem solving	12	2
Oral communication	9	1
Decision making	18	6

**Table 2.** Rankings of Employers and Students Regarding Employability

Note: The attributes displayed are those where there is a significant gap between the priorities of the stakeholders.

Source: Author's research

It can be seen that Employers valued honesty and self confidence much more than the students perceived that they do. At the same time it can be seen that students felt employers wanted graduates to have a high level of decision making skills and problem solving skills while in reality employers had not ranked them as highly.

Table 3 is a similar exercise between employers and educators:

### 5.6.2 Educator's understanding of employer priorities

Attributes	Employer Rank	Rank of Educators Perception of Employer priorities
Math Skills	15	19
Personal Appearance	16	18
Ability to work independently	19	15
Self Discipline	8	2
Creative thinking	14	7
Problem Solving	12	1
Decision Making	18	5

**Table 3.** Ranking of Attributes by Employer and educators Regarding Employability

Note: The attributes displayed are those where there is a significant gap between the priorities of the stakeholders.

Source: Authors research

In this case the problem lies in the hiatus between the two stake holders views was glaring. What employers rated as unimportant, so to say, educators perceived that employers truly valued. e.g. self discipline, problem solving etc.

### 5.7 Student Aspirations of Employability Skills

It became evident from the research that learners had different learning needs as compared with the needs of the employers. The purpose of education is not just to provide the skills that industry requires; it transcends beyond to meet the learning needs of the learners. One of the keys to curriculum design is to balance the learning needs of the learners with the employability requirements of the industries that the learners will eventually work in.

The same listing of employability skills was administered to students, who had graduated nearly a year earlier, to measure their disposition as stemming from their immediate experience. Their priorities are indicated in Table 4. The data in the table also shows student expectations in a comparative framework including their expectations of the role of the college<sup>17</sup> in the delivery of these skills: the findings were very revealing.

<b>Graduate Priority</b>	<b>Attributes</b>	<b>Aspirations for self</b>	<b>Expectations of HE role in skills development</b>	<b>Experience of Need Fulfillment at PAF (institute)</b>	<b>Satisfaction Index of employability skill delivery at college as %</b>
		a	b	c	c/3X100
1	<b>Decision making H</b>	3.00	0.88	2.13	71
2	<b>Self confidence A</b>	2.88	0.50	2.13	71
3	<b>Adaptability A</b>	2.88	0.63	2.25	75
4	<b>Problem Solving H</b>	2.75	1.00	2.13	71
5	<b>Creative thinking H</b>	2.75	0.75	2.25	75
6	<b>Dependability A</b>	2.75	0.63	2.25	75
7	<b>Interpersonal Skills A</b>	2.75	1.00	3.00	100
8	<b>Positive Attitude A</b>	2.63	0.75	1.75	58
9	<b>Self discipline A</b>	2.63	0.63	2.13	71
10	<b>Ability to work without supervision A</b>	2.63	0.88	2.50	83
11	<b>Enthusiasm A</b>	2.50	0.50	2.00	67
12	<b>Honesty A</b>	2.50	0.50	1.88	63
13	Oral Communication B	2.38	0.63	2.13	71
14	Learning skills H	2.38	0.63	2.50	83
15	Reading B	2.13	0.50	1.88	63
16	Conscientiousness A	2.13	0.75	2.25	75
17	Arithmetic B	2.00	0.13	1.88	63
18	Writing B	2.00	0.50	2.00	67
19	Appropriate dress A	1.88	0.63	1.75	58

**Table 4.** Past Students' Ratings of Employability Attributes

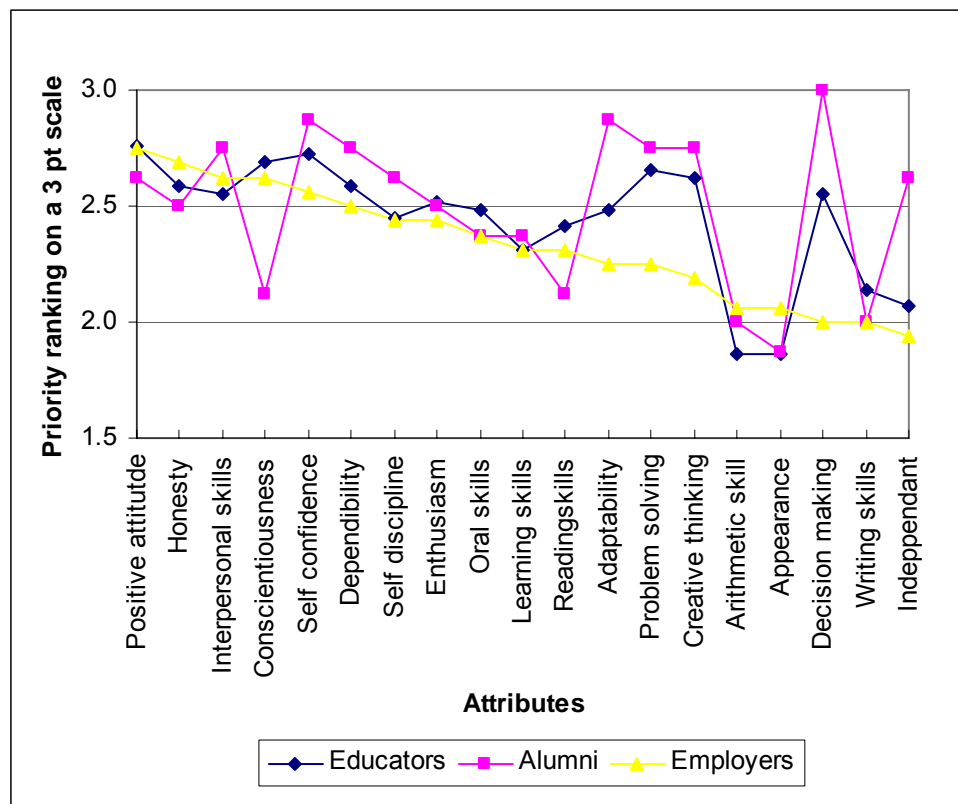
Graduate Satisfaction Index =  $\Sigma(axbxc)/\Sigma(axbx3)*100 = 73.60$  can be interpreted to say that the student's aspirations in terms of the employability skills they expected to learn at the college are fulfilled to level of 74%.

Yet out of the seventeen students who were placed during college placements (the cohort had 22 students of which 3 joined the family business and 2 pursued further studies), only seven are

employed at the time of writing this paper (11 months later). A further three have started an enterprise of their own and seven students are currently unemployed. Further discussions brought out a mismatch between graduate expectations and the jobs that they were asked to do on joining their organizations.

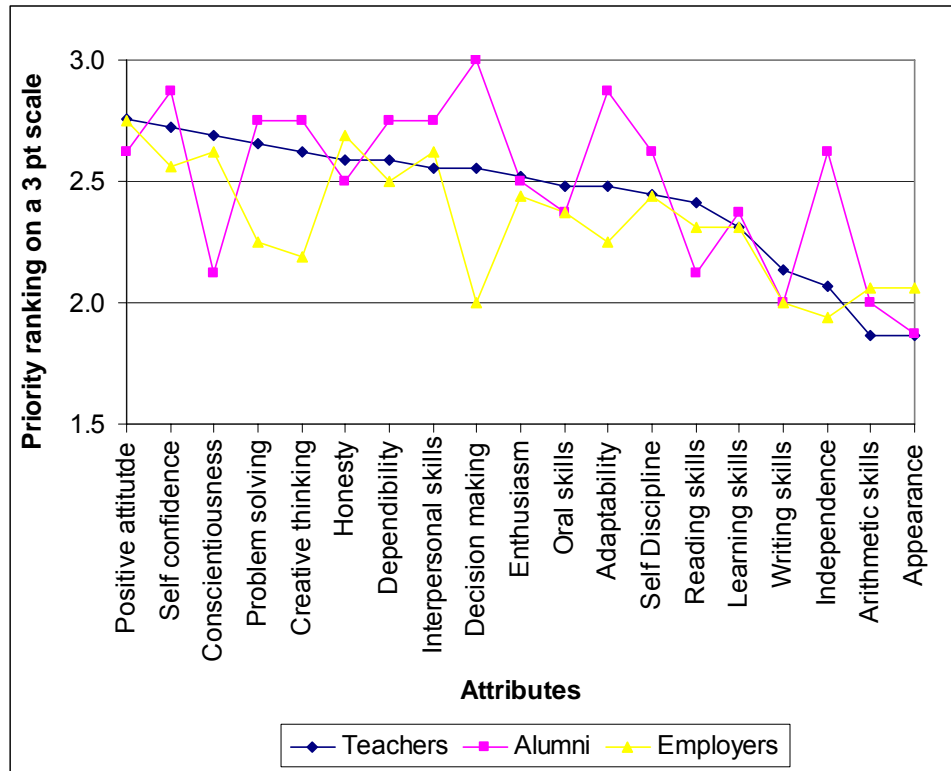
### 5.8 Relationship between graduate aspirations, HE Ideals and employer priorities

Graphs 2, 3 and 4 explore the relationships between the aspirations of the stakeholders to identify and understand the disconnect between them visible in the industry today.



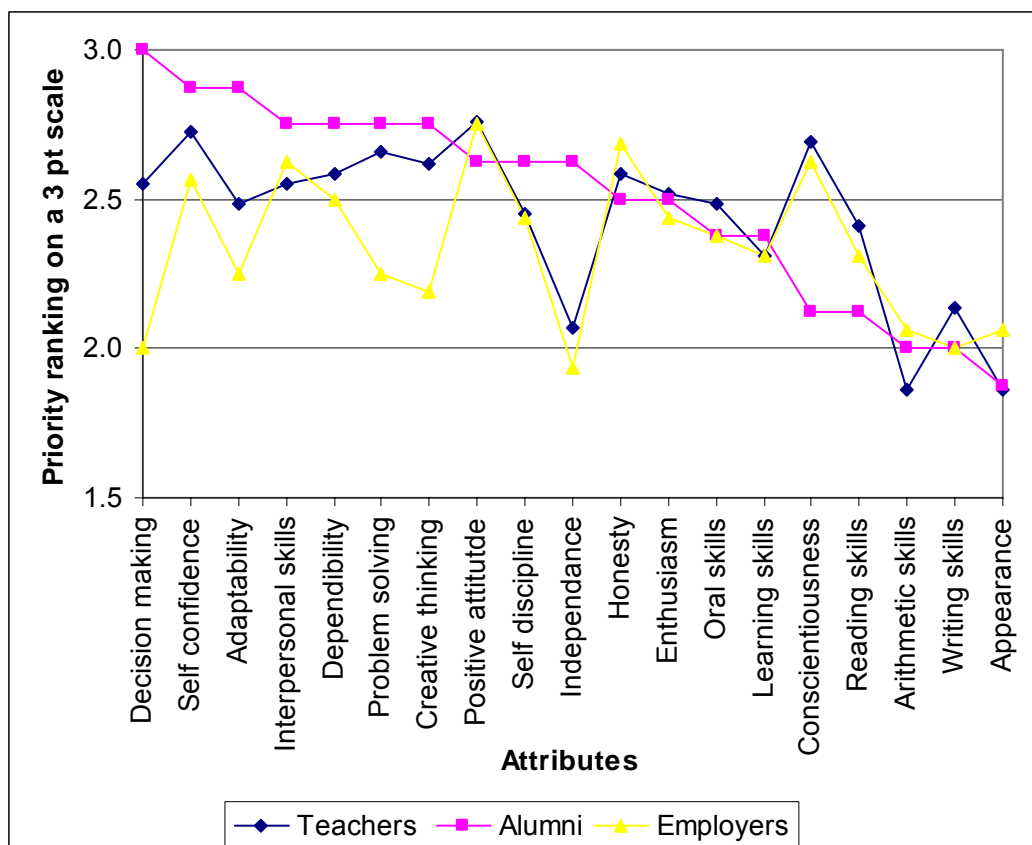
**Graph 3.** Employer Priorities vs Graduate Aspirations vs HE Ideals  
 Note: the sequence of attributes follows the view of *employers'* priorities  
 Source: Author's Research

The nearly total overlap of the trajectories in the initial part of the graph indicated that the employers were reasonably happy with graduate skills as their key priorities appeared matched by graduate qualities and education perception, apart from, discordantly, conscientiousness to which the students do not place as much importance.



**Graph 4.** HE Ideals vs Employer Priorities vs Graduate Aspirations  
 Note: the sequence of attributes follows the view of the educators priorities  
 Source: Authors Research

The trajectories of the teachers and students coincide at most of the educator priority attributes and it is only in conscientiousness where the educators place a significantly higher value to their students. This would indicate that the educators are mostly satisfied with their students. This was reaffirmed in the focus group discussions. Disparity can also be seen between some priority attributes of the educator with that of the employers – problem solving, creative thinking.



**Graph 5.** Graduate Aspirations vs Educator Ideals vs Employer Priorities  
 Note: The sequence of attributes follows the order of *graduate aspirations* of employability skills  
 Source: Authors research

This graph demonstrates clearly that there is a huge hiatus between aspirations of graduates when they were learners and employer priorities. There emerges the alarming revelation that graduates were going to be unhappy and dissatisfied in the industry. In their ten highly rated skills there was absolutely no match (apart from positive attitude) between what graduates thought to be important for their career growth and the employer environment they were working in. This disjunct naturally led to discontentment as students found it difficult to adjust to an environment that was so different to their aspirations.

Looking at the skills in question it is obvious that skills like “decision making”, “self confidence”, “problem solving” and “creative thinking” are what the students aspired to learn and the educators felt that the students should be equipped with. Both students and educators felt that the employers valued these skills at entry level (Table 1). This did not turn out to be true and it generated a discord as students expected to utilize certain skills when they joined the work



place and actually what was expected of them was different. It is a valid aspiration that higher order skills are important for ones career but the expected time frame for the use of these skills needs to be put into perspective to enable students to have fruitful early careers.

Clearly it may be interpreted that the curriculum needed to be re-examined from the point of view of the CDCO, or its treatment or both. One of the points highlighted in an intensive focus group discussion of employers was that there was a “Gap” between “student expectation vs. reality of working in the industry”.

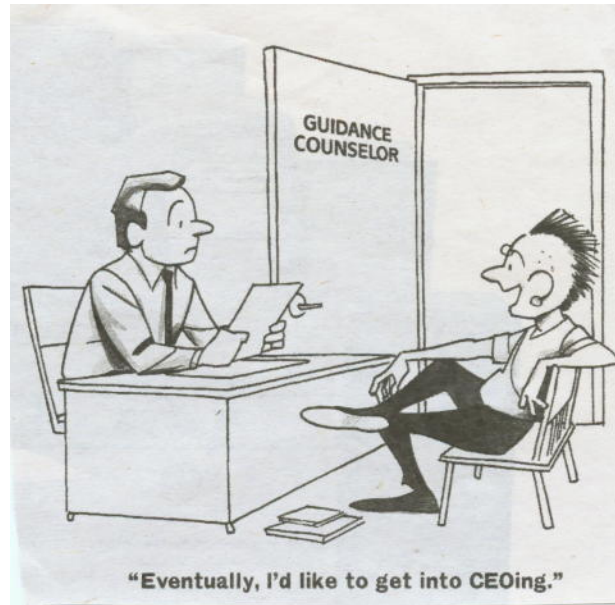
## **6.0 Conclusion**

It is evident from the above findings that there is dissonance in the employment environment of the apparel industry in India today. Educators and students do not possess clear ideas about employer skill priorities. Graduate expectations do not match employer expectations in key areas resulting in high turnover rates of graduate employees, unhappy employers and dissatisfied educators.

Employers in the apparel industry are looking for something in addition to a degree in a graduate. Graduates play different roles in different settings. It is important that they have the attributes to know how to fit into the work place and to do the job required of them; when to take risks to persuade people of the merit of new ideas; and when to think laterally, to take the initiative and responsibility and thus, move the organization forward.

The good news is that most graduates are also looking for something more than a job. They are keen to learn, apply their prior learning and make a difference to the organization while adding value to themselves and their career prospects. Unfortunately they enter the work place with perceptions that make it difficult for them to adjust themselves to what the reality is.

Students need to be clearly counseled as to what to expect from their careers at different stages. For example in their early careers there may not be congruence between wide-ranging acquired skills and narrow skill requirement for the entry job. The student should understand clearly what skills he has gained for immediate use at the workplace and what skills he needs to practice and develop further.



**Figure 3.**

At this level the students construct their own learning based on their experiences and the hypotheses of the environment<sup>18</sup>. Educators must constructively align the environment to allow the students to actively construct their own subjective representations of objective reality. These subjective representations need to be valid, else there will be a misfit in the workplace.

The role of teachers cannot be underemphasised in this process, as they are influencers and groomers. Teachers are influencers towards the expectations of the graduates when they reach the work place. Teachers mould students' attitudes toward, and perceptions of, the skills needed for success. They influence the importance given by students and their approach towards internships and their importance to future career prospects.

Based on these findings, it makes sense to formulate:

1. **An Employability skills set model for early careers in the Indian apparel industry** developed by a working party of stake holders.
2. **An Employability skills developmental cycle lead by HE as the key driver with** Interventions from other stake holders at each stage.
3. **Recommendations for HE in addressing the gaps identified**

## 6.1 Early Career Employability Skills Mapping in the Apparel Industry in India

This model may be used by educators to mentor students about the realities of early careers in the apparel industry. It supports graduate aspirations and validates the skill aspirations of the student but puts into perspective which skills may be used during the early years and which skills need to be further developed before it is ready to use as a primary skill at the opportune time. It supports the role of educators as deliverers and enablers of employability. It may be looked upon as social engineering but this methodology aims at creating a more prepared employee who keeps an eye on his long term goals.

Skills in order of student aspiration priorities	Aspirational match with Employers	Opportunity to use as a primary skill	Potential student incongruence in early career	Imperatives for Educators to bring into HE
Decision making	No	Low	High	1
Self confidence	No	Low	High	1
Adaptability	No	High	High	1
Interpersonal skills	Yes	High	Low	2
Dependability	Yes	High	Low	2
Problem solving	No	Low	High	1
Creative thinking	No	Low	High	1
Positive attitude	Yes	High	Low	2
Self discipline	Yes	High	Low	2
Independent working	No	Low	High	1
Honesty	Yes	High	Low	2
Enthusiasm	Yes	High	Low	2
Oral communication	Yes	High	Low	3,4
Learning skills	Yes	High	Low	2
Conscientiousness	No	High	High	2
Reading	Yes	High	Nil	2,3
Arithmetic	Yes	High	Nil	3
Writing	Yes	High	Nil	2,3,4
Personal Appearance	Yes	High	Nil	2

**Table 6.** Employability Skills Set Model for Early Careers in the Apparel Industry in India

Notes:

1 - Contextualisation through industry interaction, exposure and experience

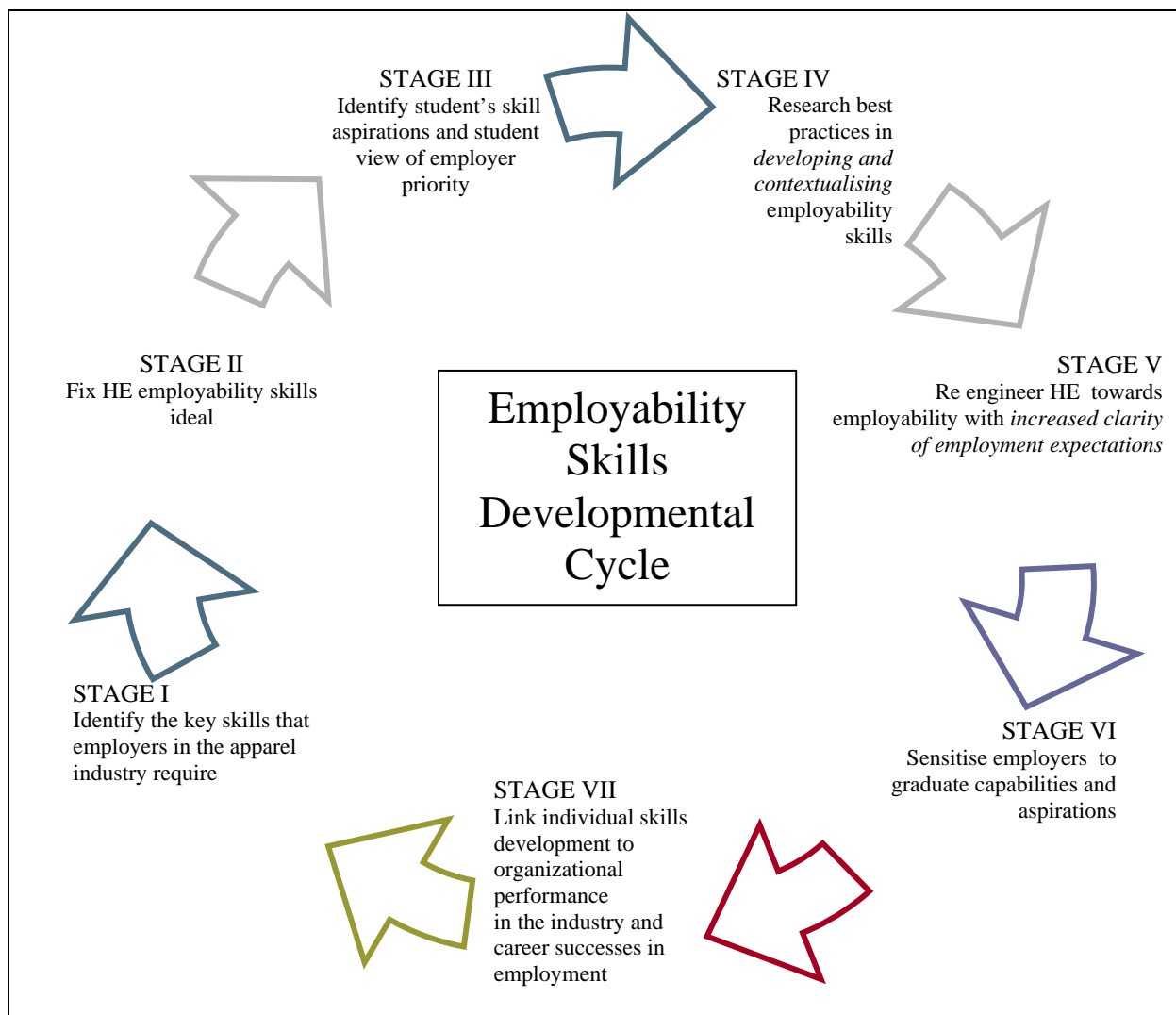
2 - Professional development programme

3 - Foundation

4 - Extra curricular activities

## 5.2 Employability Skills Developmental Cycle

This model may be used by HE to develop strategy in the area of employability. The research shows that the apparel industry in India has neither changed organizationally nor in its approach to absorb and retain graduates of HE. It is being proposed that institutes of Higher Education need to work closely with the apparel industry to help ensure that organizations are geared up to optimally use and develop the graduate for maximum mutual benefit. This is a long term strategic commitment that HE will have to make to enhance their graduate employability experience. This research covered stages I, II, III & IV and on the strength of its findings it is possible to suggest recommendations towards stage V. Stage VI and VII can be further worked on for effectiveness.



**Figure 4.** Employability Skills Development Cycle  
Source: Author

## 6.0 Recommendations for HE

There are two suggested areas where the Higher Education Institutes can contribute to addressing the gaps identified in this paper.

- a. Managing student career expectations
- b. Identifying developing student skills

The matrix below in Figure 5 describes a cycle of interventions in the space between educator and student which has been divided into 4 domains with pertinent pairing of the prevailing dichotomies.

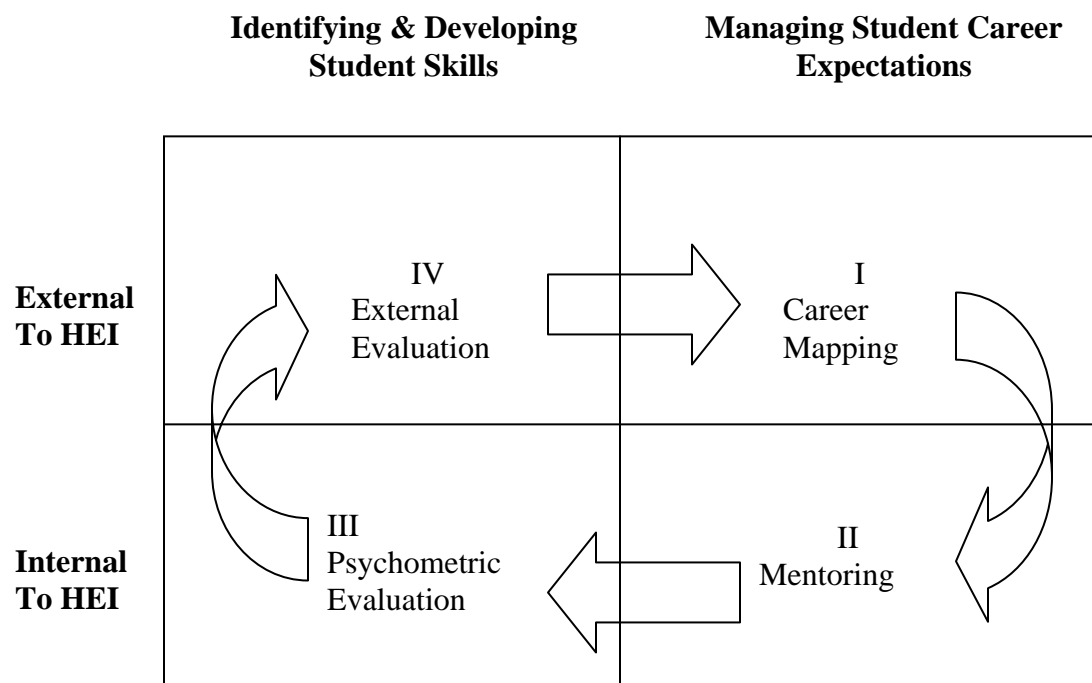


Figure 5. Source: Author

## 6.1 Managing Student Career Expectations

### Stage I - Career Mapping

It would be ideal to have a series of career talks by alumni of the college to highlight different stages of their career trajectories. This would involve descriptions of the jobs they have held, their responsibilities and the tasks which are required at each of the career

evolution stages. Such a seminar series will reiterate the realities of the world of work and opportunities for professional growth.

A critical part of this interaction with industry professionals would also be to allow the students time to make contacts within the industry so that they could develop relationships for internship, and maybe, for final placement.

### **Stage II - Mentoring**

Each student may be appointed two mentors - a senior student as a peer mentor and an industry professional as an industry mentor.

The industry mentor may be met with once a year and the directional guidelines for discussions would include the changing nature of the apparel industry and the challenges to working thereof. This may lead to referrals for internship or work placement.

The senior peer mentor meetings may be scheduled once a semester and would help contextualize the modules under study and their relevance to the broader course. It would also help give the student a more realistic idea of the applicability of areas being studied to the workplace.

## **6.2 Identifying & Developing Student Skills**

### **Stage III - Psychometric Evaluation and Competency Mapping**

It is essential for students aspiring to play certain roles in their careers to have a clear idea as to what their strengths and weaknesses are, what their skill levels and weakness are and what ideal roles they could play in a team situation. The students would be asked to undergo some psychometric evaluations at different stages during their programmes

- a. during induction
- b. after internship
- c. when applying for jobs

This would help them to understand and to map their skill matrix and modulate their aspirations. This would allow for identifying strength areas and areas for development. They may also be counseled as to what specific roles would maximize their impact in a team, what skills they could use to their advantage and what skills they need to adjust when at the workplace.

#### **Stage IV – External Evaluation**

A system of 360 degree feedback could be used to give the student a better understanding of others perception of themselves. This would help the student understand the process of feedback and use it constructively. It would also help them understand what people see them as and allow them to use this information to reflect on what they need to change to fit best into the workplace situation and what kind of job they may be best suited to.

This process would also enable students to preempt situations at the workplace as the student would be possessed of a pre - understanding as to the first impression that they are creating. It would additionally help them to interpret feedback received at the work place and to figure out how to manage relationships better.

#### **7.0 Areas for Further Research**

1. Within the context of the apparel industry in India one may look at whether different sectors in the industry have different priorities and different early career skill maps. During discussion it did appear that Apparel Brand / Retail companies had a more progressive viewpoint than the Export Houses and Buying Agencies, but this was not investigated within this paper.
2. The effectiveness of curriculum changes (as discussed) on employability skills could be researched to establish best practices within Indian HE for the Apparel Industry.
3. A comparative study could be done with early career incongruence and skills requirement in other countries in the Apparel Industries to establish whether there is a differentiation of employability skill priorities arising out of different contexts or whether the findings of this research are universally applicable.

## Appendix 1

### Best Practices in Employability

S. N.	Name of the University	employers in curriculum devpt /industry needs	Student employability needs	Links with local employers, live projects	employability skills workshops	negotiated programme	Integrated Employability Credits	Internships	voluntary service	Reflective logs	Peer discussions, evaluation, mentoring	Credits for prior experience / part time work
1	Univ of Dundee	X		X								
2	Liverpool John Moores University	X	X			X						
3	University of Reading		X				X					
4	University of Central England	X						X				X
5	York St John College	X	X					X				
6	University of Newcastle upon Tyne	X		X			X					
7	University of Birmingham	X	X	X		X						
8	University of Liverpool					X			X	X		
9	University of North London			X	x	X				X		
10	University of Wales, Bangor										X	X
11	University of East London	X	X	X		X						X
12	University of Glamorgan							X				X
13	Edge Hill college of HE									X		
14	Leeds University			X	X							
15	Nottingham Trent University											
16	Bapson College	X		X		X	X	X			X	
17	Philadelphia University			X	X					X		
18	National Institute of Design, India	X		X				X				
19	NIFT, India			X				X				



## Appendix 2

### A. Respondent Composition in Primary Research

#### In-depth Interviews towards Qualitative Analysis

- a. Employers – Senior Management / Senior HR Managers – 18
- b. Education Researcher – 1
- c. Confederation of Indian Industries CII, President, Mission on Knowledge and Skills - 1
- d. Professional Development Trainer - 2

#### Questionnaires towards Quantitative Analysis

- a. Employers – 22 ( 6 common with In-depth Interviews)
- b. Students - Level 2 – 34
- c. Teachers – 40 – employability & ideal graduate skills profile
- d. Graduates – 8 (common with Focus Group) – graduate aspirations

Focus Group 1 – Employers from the Branded Apparel Sector – 3 with core faculty team

Focus Group 2 – Employers from Apparel Export Sector – 4 with core faculty team

Focus Group 3 – Level 2 Students – 12

Focus Group 4 – Graduates who have been working for 7 months – 8

### B. Composition of Sample of Employers

	Proprietorship	Pvt Ltd	Public Ltd	Total
Exporter	1	12	5	18
Buying Agency	4	7	0	11
Brand / Retailer	1	1	10	12
Total	6	20	15	41

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