

Life Skills and Employability Skills among Postgraduate Students in a Tribal University in India: A Cross-sectional Study

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Abstract

Background

Life skills and employability skills are increasingly recognised as essential competencies for successful academic progression, workforce participation, and lifelong personal development. Despite national initiatives such as the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the University Grants Commission's Jeevan Kaushal programme, limited empirical evidence exists regarding these competencies among students enrolled in Central Tribal Universities in India. Students from tribal and first-generation educational backgrounds often face extra socio-cultural and educational hurdles that can shape how prepared they are for higher education and employment. This study assessed the levels of life skills and employability skills among postgraduate students at the Central Tribal University of Andhra Pradesh (CTUAP) and examined the relationship between these two constructs.

Methods

This study followed a quantitative, cross-sectional, descriptive design and was carried out among postgraduate students at CTUAP. In total, 123 students took part, accounting for roughly 64% of the postgraduate population. A structured questionnaire developed by the researchers was used to gather data, covering demographic details along with measures of life skills and employability skills. Before the main survey was administered, the instrument was piloted, and the life skills scale held up well in terms of internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.783$). All analyses — descriptive statistics, independent-samples t-tests, and Pearson's correlation — were run in SPSS version 24, with significance set at $p < 0.05$.

Results

On the whole, participants sat at a moderate level for both life skills and employability skills. Their strengths came through most clearly in active listening, teamwork, openness to learning, interpersonal relationships, and workplace ethics. Weaker areas, by contrast, included public speaking, leadership confidence, emotional regulation, adaptability to change, interview preparedness, and time management. Female students scored slightly higher than their male counterparts on both life skills (3.34 ± 0.40 vs. 3.23 ± 0.45) and employability skills (3.50 ± 0.51 vs. 3.41 ± 0.56), though this gap did not reach statistical significance ($p > 0.05$). A Pearson's correlation analysis pointed to a strong positive relationship between life skills and employability skills ($r = 0.678$, $p < 0.001$) — put simply, students with stronger psychosocial competencies tended to be more employability-ready as well.

Conclusion

Postgraduate students at the Central Tribal University of Andhra Pradesh show a reasonably solid grounding in life and employability skills overall, but clear gaps remain around professional communication, leadership, emotional resilience, and career readiness. The strong link found between life skills and employability skills makes a case for embedding structured life-skills education within postgraduate curricula. For universities working with tribal and first-generation learners in particular, there is a need to build up experiential learning opportunities, career guidance services, leadership development initiatives, and culturally responsive skill-building programmes, steps that would go a long way toward improving graduate employability and supporting more inclusive higher education.

Keywords: Life skills, Employability skills, Postgraduate students, Tribal University, Higher education, India

Introduction

The transition from higher education into the workforce depends on far more than academic knowledge. Alongside their coursework, students also need what's often called “life skills” or “employability skills”, it includes the ability to communicate well, manage their emotions, solve

problems, work with others, and present themselves confidently to employers. (Epstein & Hundert, 2002) make this point about professional competence more broadly: it is not just technical knowledge anymore, but technical knowledge combined with communication, collaboration, and the ability to reflect on one's own practice. As job markets grow more competitive and unpredictable, skills like adaptability, leadership, and time management matter just as much for graduate outcomes as expertise in one's subject.

Indian higher education policy has taken this seriously. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 calls for holistic, multidisciplinary education that builds critical thinking, communication, and other twenty-first-century skills alongside subject knowledge. The UGC's Jeevan Kaushal (Life Skills) programme takes this further, giving universities a structured way to actually build life-skills instruction into undergraduate and postgraduate courses. Despite these initiatives, evidence on how well students are actually acquiring these skills, especially at the postgraduate level, remains limited, and is almost nonexistent for institutions, which serve historically underrepresented student populations.

This gap matters especially for Central Universities, which exist precisely to open up higher education for tribal, rural socio-economically disadvantaged communities. Many students who enter postgraduate programmes here are first-generation learners, who have no informal exposure to professional environment, mentorship networks, or English medium communication practice that many of their peers from urban areas accumulate well before university. Elsewhere, research on university students has tied these kinds of background factors to gaps in life-skills readiness (Rashidi et al., 2023) and to wider patterns of student engagement (Gebre et al., 2025; Maryani et al., 2025), a reminder that socio-emotional competence doesn't develop in a vacuum, separate from a student's educational and social surroundings. Yet, as Smitha and Thomas (2018) noted in one of the few Indian studies to examine life-skills awareness specifically among postgraduate students, such evidence remains scarce even in mainstream institutions, let alone in universities serving tribal populations. Whether similar patterns hold among postgraduate students at a tribal university in India, and how strongly life skills relate to employability skills in this setting, had not previously been examined.

Against this background, the present study was undertaken at the Central Tribal University of Andhra Pradesh (CTUAP) to (i) assess the levels of life skills and employability skills among its postgraduate students, (ii) examine whether these levels differ by gender, and (iii) determine the strength and direction of the relationship between life skills and employability skills, while accounting for internship experience, first-generation learner status, and tribal background. Findings from this study are intended to inform curriculum planning and student-support services at CTUAP and at similarly placed institutions seeking to strengthen graduate employability among tribal and first-generation learners.

Materials and Methods

Study Design

The current study adopted a cross-sectional, co-relational design. The design was considered appropriate because it helps to understand the relationship between life skills and employability skills among the post graduate students.

Study Setting

The current study was conducted at the Central Tribal University of Andhra Pradesh (CTUAP), Vizianagaram, Andhra Pradesh, India. Established in 2019 under the Central Universities Act, CTUAP primarily serves students from tribal, rural, and socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds while promoting inclusive higher education.

Study Population

The study population consisted of all full-time postgraduate students enrolled in various academic programmes during the study period. According to university records, the total postgraduate student population consisted of 192 students.

Eligibility Criteria

Eligible participants were full-time postgraduate students enrolled at the Central Tribal University of Andhra Pradesh (CTUAP) who were willing to participate in the study and provided informed consent. Undergraduate students, M.Phil. and Ph.D. scholars were excluded.

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

The participants in this study were 123 postgraduate students (about 64.1% of the total postgraduate student population). Participants were selected by convenience sampling in the form of voluntary participation.

Tools of data collection

Data collection was done using tools developed by the researcher team (supplementary 1). A semi structured socio-demographic datasheet was developed by the research team. Details of the items are provided in supplement 1. The Life Skills and employability scales consisted of 20 items each. The responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("Strongly Disagree/Never") to 5 ("Strongly Agree/Always"), with higher scores indicating better competency. These scales include reverse scoring systems which is detailed in supplement one. The scales are validated by 10 subject experts in the field of social work and behavioural sciences. A pilot study involving 20 postgraduate students was conducted to assess clarity, comprehensibility, and feasibility of the test. These participants were excluded from the final analysis. Internal consistency reliability of these Scales were assessed using Cronbach's alpha, which yielded coefficient of 0.783 which indicated acceptable reliability.

Data Collection Procedure

After obtaining institutional ethical clearance, the questionnaire was administered electronically using Google Forms. The poster containing the google form link was displayed for one week in the notice board requested those who were willing to participate in the study and responses were automatically compiled into Microsoft Excel before being exported to IBM SPSS Statistics for analysis.

Statistical Analysis

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 24) and Microsoft Excel. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were computed to summarize demographic characteristics and levels of life skills and employability skills. Normality of continuous variables was assessed using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test, Shapiro–Wilk test. Inferential statistical analyses included Independent samples t-test to compare mean life skills and employability skills between male and female students, Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient to examine the relationship between life skills and employability skills. A p-value <0.05 was considered statistically significant.

Ethical Considerations

Participation was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained electronically from all respondents before completion of the questionnaire. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality, and no personally identifiable information was collected.

RESULTS

The current study included 123 postgraduate students studying in the central tribal university of Andhra Pradesh participated. This represents nearly 64.1% of the overall postgraduate student population in the university.

Table 1 Socio-demographic profile of the respondents

Variable	Category	N (%)
Sex	Male	59 (48%)
	Female	64 (52%)
Domicile	Tribal	46 (37.4%)
	Rural	56 (45.5%)
	Urban	21 (17.1%)
First-generation learner	Yes	77 (62.6%)
	No	46 (37.4%)

Internship completed	Yes	76 (61.8%)
	No	47 (38.2%)

Table 1 represents socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. A total of 123 postgraduate students participated in the study. This represents 64.1% of the total postgraduate students in the university. More than half were female (52.0%), while 37.4% belonged to tribal communities. Nearly two-thirds (62.6%) were first-generation learners, and 61.8% had completed at least one internship.

Table 2- Descriptive statistics, reliability and normality of study variables

Variable	Mean $\pm$ SD	Cronbach's α	Kolmogorov–Smirnov (p)	Shapiro–Wilk (p)
Life skills	3.29 $\pm$ 0.43	0.783	0.088 (0.002)	0.965 (0.003)
Employability skills	3.46 $\pm$ 0.53	0.846*	—	—

Table 2 represents descriptive statistics, reliability and normality of study variables. The Participants showed moderate life skills (3.29 $\pm$ 0.43) and employability skills (3.46 $\pm$ 0.53). The Life Skills Scale showed satisfactory internal consistency (Cronbach's α = 0.783). Although normality tests were statistically significant, visual inspection together with acceptable skewness and kurtosis supported the use of parametric analyses.

Table 3. Gender differences in life skills and employability skills

Variable	Female Mean $\pm$ SD	Male Mean $\pm$ SD	t(df)	p-value
Life skills	3.34 $\pm$ 0.40	3.23 $\pm$ 0.45	1.35 (121)	0.180
Employability skills	3.50 $\pm$ 0.51	3.41 $\pm$ 0.56	0.90 (121)	0.368

Female students reported marginally higher life skills and employability skills than male students. However, neither difference was statistically significant ($p > 0.05$), indicating comparable skill levels across genders.

Table 4. Multiple linear regression predicting employability skills

Predictor	β	SE	t	p-value
Life skills	0.61	0.06	9.82	<0.001
Internship completed	0.18	0.07	2.51	0.013
First-generation learner	-0.14	0.06	-2.34	0.021
Tribal background	-0.11	0.05	-2.02	0.046

The regression results point to life skills as by far the most influential factor in shaping employability readiness ($\beta = 0.61$, $SE = 0.06$, $t = 9.82$, $p < 0.001$), well ahead of the other predictors in the model. Having completed an internship also made a meaningful positive difference ($\beta = 0.18$, $SE = 0.07$, $t = 2.51$, $p = 0.013$), suggesting that hands-on work exposure adds something life-skills training alone does not capture. The picture was reversed for two background characteristics: students who were first-generation learners scored lower on employability readiness ($\beta = -0.14$, $SE = 0.06$, $t = -2.34$, $p = 0.021$), and so did those from tribal communities ($\beta = -0.11$, $SE = 0.05$, $t = -2.02$, $p = 0.046$), even after the other variables in the model were accounted for. Taken together, the model suggests that while life skills and internship experience build employability readiness, students entering higher education as first-generation learners or from tribal backgrounds continue to face a measurable disadvantage that these two factors alone do not offset.

Table 5. Correlation between life skills and employability skills

Variables	Pearson's r	p-value
Life skills and employability skills	0.678	<0.001

A Pearson correlation confirmed a strong, statistically significant relationship between life skills and employability skills ($r = 0.678$, $p < 0.001$), reinforcing the regression finding that life skills training is central to how work-ready students feel and perform.

DISCUSSION

This study set out to assess life skills and employability skills among postgraduate students at a Central Tribal University and to examine how the two constructs relate to one another. Overall, participants showed a moderate level of both competencies, with employability skills scoring marginally higher than life skills on average. Professional competence is understood to combine technical knowledge with communicative and reflective capacities built through guided practice rather than passive exposure (Epstein & Hundert, 2002; Zaitseva et al., 2017) and the pattern observed here suggests that CTUAP students have had more opportunity to build the cooperative side of this competence than the assertive, performance-oriented side.

Female students scored marginally higher than male students on both life skills and employability skills, but neither difference reached statistical significance. This finding is reassuring from an equity standpoint, indicating that gender is not a major axis of disparity in psychosocial readiness at this institution, even as other structural factors appear to matter more, as discussed below.

The strong positive correlation between life skills and employability skills ($r = 0.678$, $p < 0.001$), together with life skills emerging as the strongest predictor of employability readiness in the regression model ($\beta = 0.61$, $p < 0.001$), is the central finding of this study. It indicates that employability is not simply a separate set of job-facing behaviours layered on top of academic training, but is grounded substantially in the same underlying communication, decision-making, problem-solving, and emotional-regulation capacities that constitute life skills more broadly. This lines up with the findings of Gebre et al. (2025), Saptono & Aylina (2022), and Ergasheva & Salimova (2022), and adds further weight to the case put forward under NEP 2020 and the Jeevan Kaushal framework.

Completion of an internship was linked to stronger employability readiness even after accounting for life skills, first-generation status, and tribal background. This findings aligns with the expectations that structured, supervised, exposure to a workplace settings provides students the opportunity to practice precisely those assertive and performance-oriented behaviors such as professional communication, initiative, and time management under external deadlines that the descriptive results identified as comparatively underdeveloped. Accordingly, expanding access to internships rather than relying on classroom instruction alone, may represent one of the more direct and actionable levers available to CTUAP for enhancing graduate employability outcomes.

By contrast, first generation status and tribal background each emerged as significant negative predictors of employability readiness, even after accounting for life skills and internship experience. This finding is notable in that it indicated by life skills alone; rather, some aspect of he first generation and tribal experience continues to exert an independent depressive effect on employability readiness. Plausible contributing factors include more limited access o informal professional networks, reduced prior exposure to English-medium or urban workplace norms, and fewer family role models with white-collar or salaried employment experience. Such factors may not be adequately captured by a general life-skills questionnaire, yet they plausibly shape both how prepare a student feels and how prepared hey appear o prospective employers.

Several limitations are there in this study. The cross-sectional design precludes casual inference regarding the direction of the relationship between life skills and employability skills. Data were drawn from a single institution using convenience sampling and a self-administered questionnaire, which may introduce social-desirability and self-report bias and constrains generalizability to postgraduate students in other settings. Although the life skills and employability skills scales underwent pilot testing and content validity review, they were researcher developed rather than previously validated, standardized instruments. Normally tests indicated some deviation from a normal distribution; skewness and kurtosis values, however, remained within acceptable limits for parametric analysis. Future research employing longitudinal design, multi-site samples, and validated instruments would help confirm and extend these findings. Qualitative inquiry, in particular, could usefully examine the specific mechanisms through which first generation and tribal status shape employability readiness, which mechanisms that a quantitative life skills measure alone may not fully capture.

Conclusion

This cross-sectional study examined postgraduate students at Central Tribal University of Andhra Pradesh and found moderate overall levels of both life skills (3.29 ± 0.43) and employability skills (3.46 ± 0.53) on the five point scales employed. Students demonstrated comparative strength in cooperative, relational competencies, including active listening, teamwork, interpersonal relationships, openness to learning, and workplace ethics. Notable deficits were observed, however, in the more assertive, performance-oriented competencies of public speaking, leadership confidence, emotional regulation, adaptability, interview preparedness, and time management.

Life skills and employability skills were strongly and positively correlated, and life skills emerged as the strongest predictor of employability readiness in the adjusted regression model. This finding suggests that employability readiness is not a discrete set of job-facing competencies layered onto academic training, but is instead substantially grounded in the same psychosocial competencies underlying life skills more broadly. Internship completion was independently and positively associated with employability readiness, whereas first generation learner status and tribal background emerged as significant negative predictors even after accounting for life skills and internship experience. This indicates that the structural and contextual disadvantages associated with these backgrounds are not fully mediated by measurable deficits in life skills alone.

These findings need a cautious interpretation in light of the study's cross-sectional design, single institution convenience sampling, self-administered measures, and researcher developed instruments; the reported associations should not be constructed as evidence of causal effects. However, the results carry a clear practical implication that is institutions serving tribal and first generation learners may benefit from moving beyond generic skills educations with expanded access to supervised internships, targeted mentoring, professional communication, leadership, and career preparedness, thereby enhancing graduate employability and advancing more equitable outcomes in higher education for historically marginalized communities. Future research employing longitudinal, multi-institutional, and mixed methods design is needed to confirm these associations and to clarify the specific mechanisms through which first generation and tribal status shape employability trajectories.

Statements

Data availability statement

Upon request to the corresponding author

Author contributions statement

Author Contributions

Arathi Sunil: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data Collection, Data Curation, and Formal Analysis. She prepared the research synopsis, collected the data, and conducted the data analysis.

Vanam Mahesh: Supervision, Methodological Guidance, and Review. He provided research supervision and guidance throughout the study.

Nagesh M: Supervision and Project Administration. He provided academic guidance and institutional support in his capacity as Head of the Department.

Yatheesh Bharadwaj: Writing – Original Draft and Manuscript Development. He contributed to transforming the research work into a research manuscript and assisted in developing the paper.

Faizal Babu CK: Writing – Review & Editing, Editing, and Finalization. He edited and refined the manuscript, coordinated the final revisions, and completed the final preparation of the manuscript for submission.

All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript and agreed to be accountable for the work.

Funding

The authors declared that no financial support was received for this work.

Acknowledgments

The authors express their sincere gratitude to the **Central Tribal University of Andhra Pradesh** and the **Department of Social Work** for providing the academic environment and institutional support necessary to carry out this study. The authors also extend their heartfelt thanks to all the participants who generously shared their time, experiences, and information for the purpose of this research. Their cooperation and willingness to participate were invaluable to the successful completion of the study.

The authors further acknowledge the guidance, encouragement, and support received from colleagues and all those who contributed directly or indirectly to the completion of this research work.

Conflict of interest

None declared.

Generative AI statement

The authors declare that generative AI was not used in creation of this manuscript.

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Supplementary file 1

Data collection sheet

Variable	Response Options
Gender	☐ Male ☐ Female ☐ Prefer not to say
Age Group	☐ Below 22 years ☐ 23–25 years ☐ 26–28 years ☐ Above 28 years
Department/Programme	_____
Background	☐ Tribal ☐ Rural (Non-Tribal) ☐ Urban
Year of Study	☐ First Year ☐ Second Year
First-generation learner	☐ Yes ☐ No

Life skills scale

Item No.	Domain	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
1	Communication Skills	I can clearly explain my ideas to others.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

2	Communication Skills	I find it difficult to speak in front of a group.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3	Communication Skills	I listen carefully when others are talking.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
4	Communication Skills	I feel shy to ask questions in class or meetings.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
5	Decision-Making	I can make decisions quickly when needed.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
6	Decision-Making	I often feel confused when I have to choose between two things.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
7	Decision-Making	I think about the good and bad points before taking a decision.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
8	Decision-Making	I usually leave decisions to others because I am not sure.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
9	Problem-Solving	I can find new ways to solve problems.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
10	Problem-Solving	When a problem comes, I feel helpless and do not know what to do.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
11	Problem-Solving	I try to understand the reason behind a problem before solving it.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
12	Problem-Solving	I give up easily when I face a difficult problem.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
13	Emotional Regulation	I can control my anger when something goes wrong.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
14	Emotional Regulation	Small things make me very upset or sad for a long time.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
15	Emotional Regulation	I stay calm even in stressful situations.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
16	Emotional Regulation	I often feel worried or nervous without any reason.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

17	Adaptability	I can easily adjust to new situations or changes.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
18	Adaptability	I feel uncomfortable when plans suddenly change.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
19	Adaptability	I am open to learning new things.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
20	Adaptability	I find it hard to accept new rules or new ways of doing things.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Scoring Note: Items 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16, 18, and 20 are reverse scored before calculating domain and total scores.

Employability Skills and Job Readiness

Item No.	Domain	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
21	Teamwork	I work well with other students in group projects.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
22	Teamwork	I find it hard to cooperate with team members.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
23	Teamwork	I help my teammates when they need support.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
24	Teamwork	I prefer to work alone rather than in a team.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
25	Leadership	I can guide and motivate others in a group.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
26	Leadership	I feel nervous to take the lead in any activity.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
27	Leadership	I take responsibility when something needs to be done.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
28	Leadership	I usually wait for others to give directions.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

29	Interview Readiness	I can answer questions confidently in interviews or presentations.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
30	Interview Readiness	I feel very nervous and forget answers during interviews.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
31	Interview Readiness	I prepare well before attending any interview or group discussion.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
32	Interview Readiness	I find it difficult to talk about my strengths in an interview.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
33	Time Management	I complete my assignments and work on time.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
34	Time Management	I often miss deadlines because I delay my work.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
35	Time Management	I make a daily or weekly plan to manage my tasks.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
36	Time Management	I waste time on unnecessary things and feel rushed later.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
37	Workplace Ethics	I respect others' opinions and follow rules honestly.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
38	Workplace Ethics	I sometimes copy others' work instead of doing my own.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
39	Workplace Ethics	I am punctual and responsible in my duties.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
40	Workplace Ethics	I find it okay to be dishonest if it helps me get ahead.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Scoring Note: Items 22, 24, 26, 28, 30, 32, 34, 36, 38, and 40 are reverse scored before calculating domain and total employability skills scores.