

**UNIVERSITY CORPORATE
PARTNERSHIPS:
CONNECTING UNIVERSITIES
AND CORPORATES IN THE
UK AND INDIA**

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INTRODUCTION

The University Corporate Partnership (UCP) initiative stemmed from two challenges our members and clients have consistently conveyed to us. The first is that universities tell us it is challenging to forge collaborations and partnerships with Indian businesses. Despite being world leading and highly ranked in their specialist subjects, they find it difficult to capture the attention of Indian corporates as compared to businesses in other countries they engage with.

At the same time, Indian businesses tell us that despite their best efforts, they find it difficult to hire graduates with the skills they need. As a result, they continue to face skills shortages in the workplace and are forced to incur significant costs in retraining and upskilling their employees.

This complex situation is further exacerbated when juxtaposed against the backdrop of constant digital disruption and a rapidly evolving 21st century workplace which increasingly requires its people to be extremely flexible, adaptive and equipped with holistic skills --- spanning technical, digital leadership, and soft skills to name a few.

Employability was already a significant problem in India (only 47% of Indian graduates are considered 'employable' as stated in a recent India Skills Report by Wheebox, People Strong and CII in 2019) and the onset of a digital era expedited by the global pandemic has meant that the status quo can no longer continue as it is. It is time for a complete overhaul of hiring practices and rules, of the education curriculum, of values, perspectives and priorities. Ultimately, what is needed is a mindset shift amongst all stakeholders – employers, academia, institutions, students, parents and governments – if we are to fix the problem, make the most of this opportunity and futureproof the workplace and society for many years to come. The UCP initiative is the UKIBC's attempt to do just this.

THE UCP PROGRAMME

Accordingly, the UCP programme was developed as a creative solution to help universities and businesses address their individual requirements by bringing them together to foster greater awareness and understanding, explore mutual synergies, broaden their horizons and forge long-term partnerships. These partnerships could take any form based on mutual benefit such as:

- joint research
- training arrangements
- graduate placements
- internships
- PhD sponsorships

The first stage of the UCP programme comprised of a survey of both Indian corporates and UK universities that we conducted in October 2020 to understand their specific needs and challenges as well as gauge the potential for new links and partnerships between these stakeholders.

Our survey was taken by 44 companies and 14 universities. The majority of respondents were larger, well established companies who already have some level of UK engagement.

This report shares the key findings and highlights of this groundbreaking survey and draws conclusions based on the data acquired.

Looking ahead, we intend to use the insights from this report to segment like-minded universities and corporates into clusters and facilitate regular interactions between them with the aim of bridging this gap and securing long-term sustainable industry - academic partnerships between these stakeholders.

SURVEY RESPONDENTS

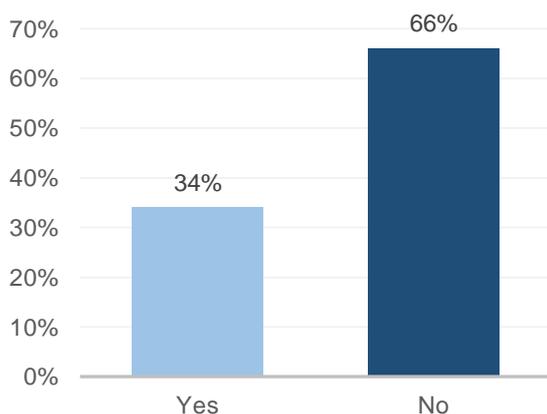
As mentioned above, 44 companies in total responded to this survey, of which around half of them (47%) are large companies with more than 500 employees. This indicates that international academic collaboration is more appealing to larger companies who seem to be more inclined to consider and explore these strategic engagements. While smaller firms tend to be more focused on short-term commercial and operational gains and often lack the bandwidth to prioritise international academic partnerships.

Of the 18 universities that we surveyed, 14 responded which points to a real desire on their part to deepen engagement with Indian companies.

SURVEY ANALYSIS

Our survey was designed to ascertain where the commonalities lie between higher education institutions and the corporates, to gauge the view of each on several issues, and where the most promising areas for partnerships lie.

Q) Do Indian companies currently have tie-ups with universities or vocational training companies (Indian or international)?



Only 34% responded positively to this question indicating that the remaining companies have not yet focused on forging links with universities or training companies neither Indian nor international. This shows that there is much more potential for greater industry-academic partnerships between Indian businesses and UK universities.

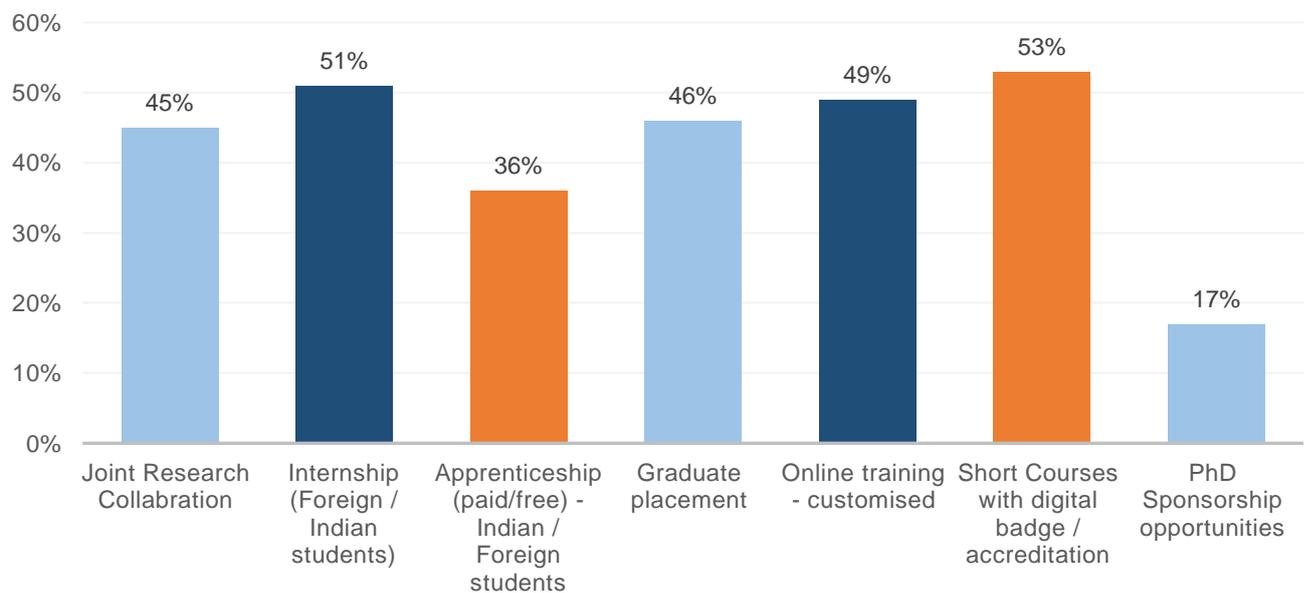
If we delve deeper, we can see that this is because historically in India, there has been a tendency to operate in silos and not prioritise cross-sectoral partnerships between industry and academia. The lack of interaction and communication between Indian businesses and universities (both Indian and international) consequently leads to bigger operational problems such as skills gaps, graduates who are less employable, higher costs of retraining recruits, and universities whose curriculum is not in sync

with the requirements of the Indian corporates. By developing stronger and better synergies and partnerships with each other, both stakeholders will be able to address their individual and collective challenges and achieve win-win outcomes.

A particular characteristic of UK universities is the excellent engagement they have with businesses, particularly those in their locality but also much further afield. In terms of academia-industry collaboration, there is a lot of transferable know-how across the UK Higher Education system which Indian industry would derive benefit from.

The majority of the universities (59% to be exact) informed us that they do not have tie ups whereas the remaining 41% have managed to secure linkages both current and past with Indian corporates. However, graduate placements constitute only 25% of this engagement which is considered low as this is an area that UK institutions are keen to ramp up.

Q) What kind of collaboration and partnerships would Indian companies be interested in exploring with UK universities?



Short courses emerged as the most popular form of engagement for 53% of the respondents with internships coming a close second at 51%. Customised online training programmes, followed by graduate placements and joint research collaborations followed closely behind at 49%, 47% and 45% respectively while only 17% expressed interested in PhD sponsorship opportunities.

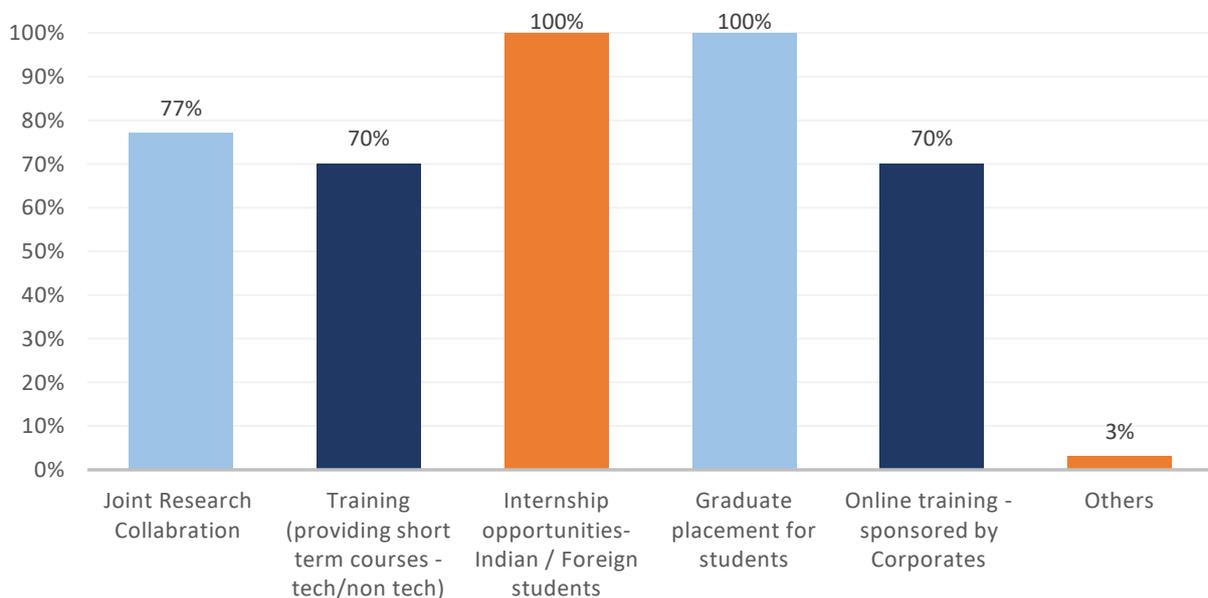
This data indicates that Indian corporates tend to view universities more as training providers and a source of fresh talent and less so as research and innovation hubs. While it is encouraging to see that there is significant interest amongst Indian businesses to partner with UK universities for short courses, internships and graduate placements, we think it would be beneficial for all concerned if they were to place more importance on joint research collaborations and PhD sponsorships than they currently do. This is because there is conclusive evidence to show that the best and most impactful research is that which has inputs from both academia and industry – take for example the revolutionary Oxford COVID-

19 vaccine (ChAdOx1 nCoV-19) which was developed by a team of Oxford scientists in collaboration with Astra Zeneca which has so far been approved in more than 40 countries around the world and 1 billion doses of which are being manufactured by the Serum Institute of India in Pune.

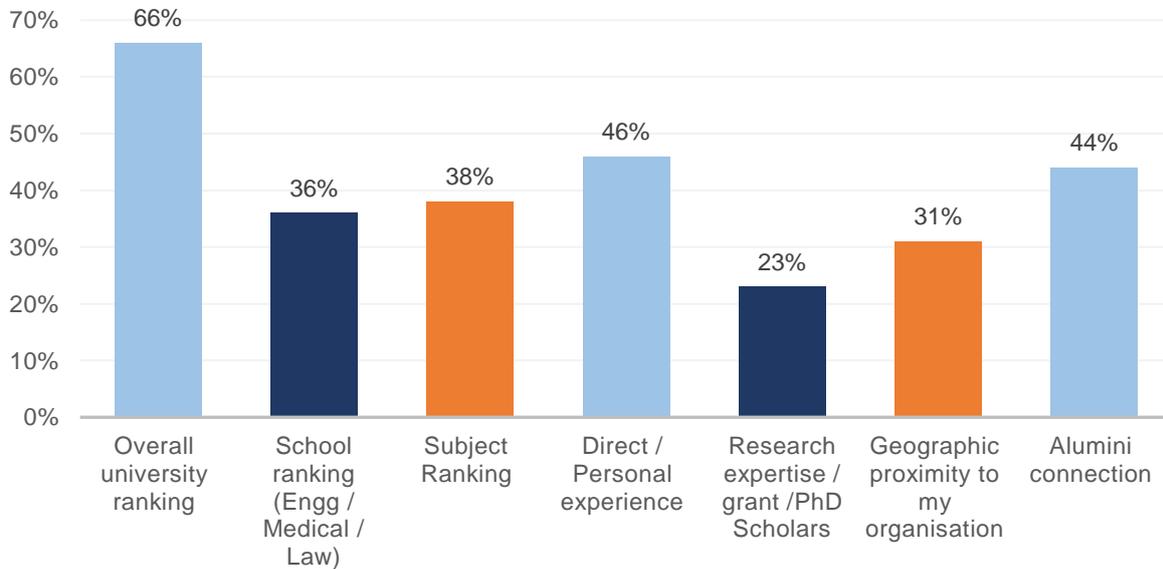
Supporting PhD scholars could deliver numerous wins for an organisation as it would facilitate two-way learning and enable the company to have a very specialist individual working closely with them on an area of their interest and benefit. Thus, there is a real case to be made for more joint research and PhD sponsorship arrangements between UK academic institutions and Indian corporates.

Universities for their part, placed the most and equal importance on graduate placements and internships (100%) with R&D and Executive MBAs coming in next at 75% while online training courses ranked lower at 66%. So, there are some real complementarities, with both corporates and universities eager to focus on graduate placement and internships/apprenticeships, but also a high level of interest in both sides on research collaborations.

Q) What are the key engagement areas that UK universities prefer while exploring partnerships with Indian corporates?



Q) What are the key attributes for Indian businesses when determining their partner UK university?



66% of the participants chose overall university ranking as their preferred key attribute. This indicates that the majority of them do not value the importance of specialist subject expertise and the benefits of a much more focused approach when it comes to looking at UK universities.

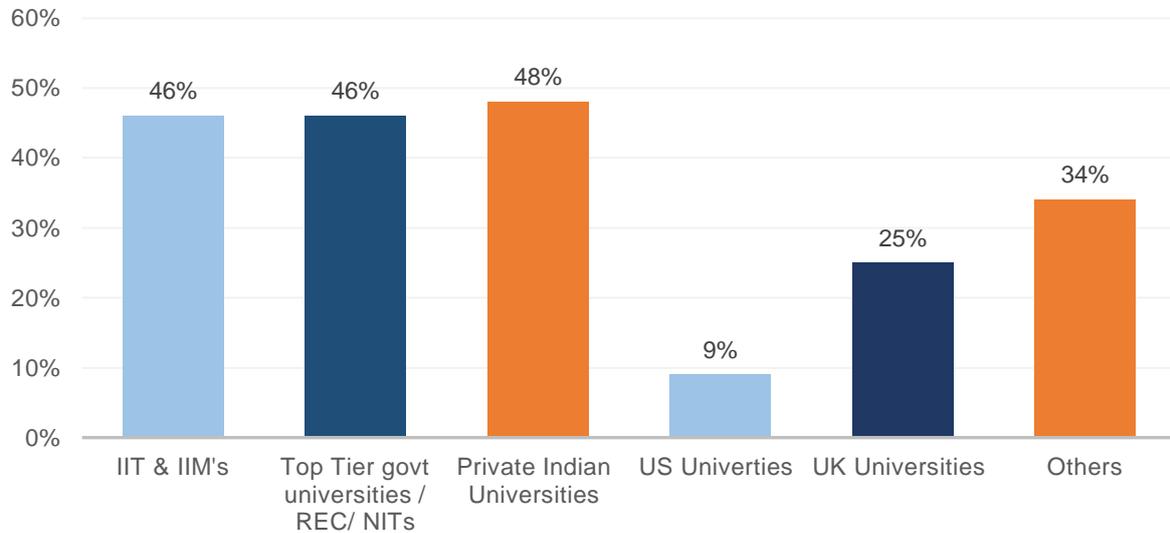
This is a missed opportunity and is something that the UKIBC has been actively trying to address as part of our ongoing advocacy and awareness raising work. As explained in our 2018 report ‘Beyond the Top 200’, overall global rankings are not an accurate indication of the quality or calibre of a university – instead a much better and more relevant parameter for employers is the institution’s ranking per subject.

For example, a university might be in the top 10 globally for its overall ranking but ranks lower for its expertise in mechanical engineering which is a skill required by automobile companies. Another university might be lower in its overall global rankings but in the top 10 for its course in mechanical engineering. So, it would make much more business sense for an automobile company to recruit new talent from the university which has the subject expertise (mechanical engineering) rather than hiring a graduate from the university with the higher overall global ranking.

Our corporates also placed a lot of importance on the direct/personal aspect as well as the alumni connection (47% and 45% respectively over all the other attributes). This clearly means that UK universities should actively prioritise developing personal relationships with Indian corporates and invest in strengthening their alumni network to gain an edge over their competitors. Alumni are excellent ambassadors, and the UK universities could leverage this route to connect in turn with their employers.

Once again, research expertise of a university or its access to research grants and PhD scholars ranked the lowest, revealing that research tends not to be as high a priority for Indian companies.

Q) Which universities (Indian and International) do Indian employers usually tend to hire their graduates from?



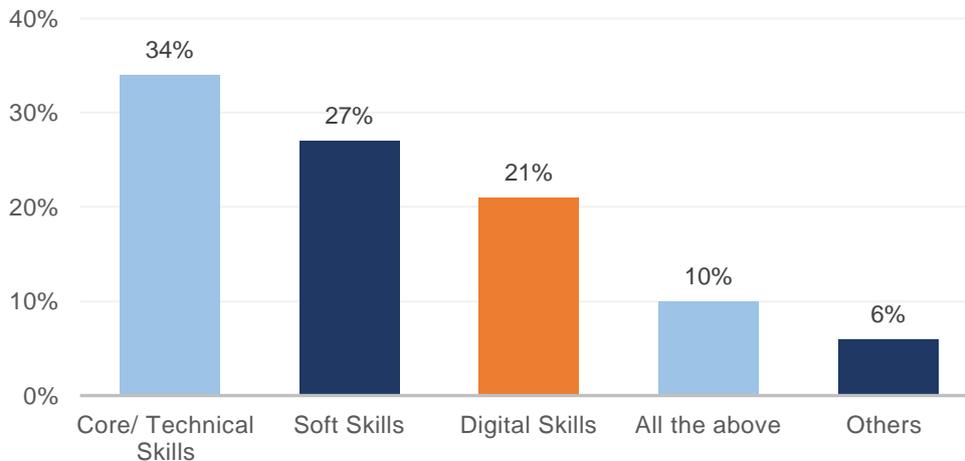
49% chose private Indian universities, 47% chose IITs/IIMs (Indian Institutes of Technology/Management) and top tier government institutions, and 26% chose UK universities while 9% chose US universities.

While it is natural to favour institutions in one's own country over those of others, we may also conclude from these statistics suggest that our respondents do not know enough about the myriad capabilities of a wider cross-section of leading UK universities.

It is safe to assume that they are not as familiar or well acquainted with the latter as they are with the top tier Indian universities and business schools and even a select few UK big hitters such as Oxford, Cambridge and London Business School to name a few.

Thus, this points once again to the need for UK universities to make greater efforts to creatively enhance their brand profile in country and disseminate information to this target market about their capabilities and strengths. Making the right impact in India requires commitment, patience, planning, financial investment and a deep understanding of its people.

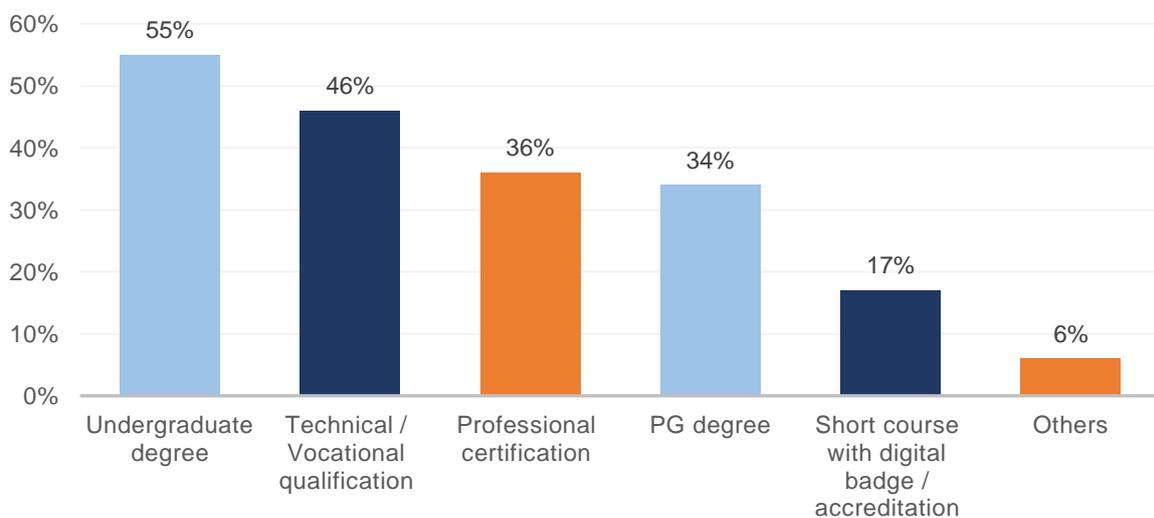
Q) What are the biggest skills gaps that Indian employers struggle with?



Core/technical skills ranked the highest followed closely by soft skills and then digital skills. These figures clearly point to the evolving needs and changing priorities of today’s employers who increasingly want people who come equipped with not just the requisite technical skills but also soft skills and digital knowhow. Set against a background of a workplace which is in a state of constant flux, it becomes critical to have employees who possess holistic capabilities and can adapt quickly and creatively to the situation at hand.

One of the ways Indian businesses can ensure that they have access to a talent pool equipped with the skills they need is by regularly engaging in an ongoing dialogue with educational institutions in India and abroad to ensure that the curriculum and the teaching is aligned with the rapidly changing needs of industry.

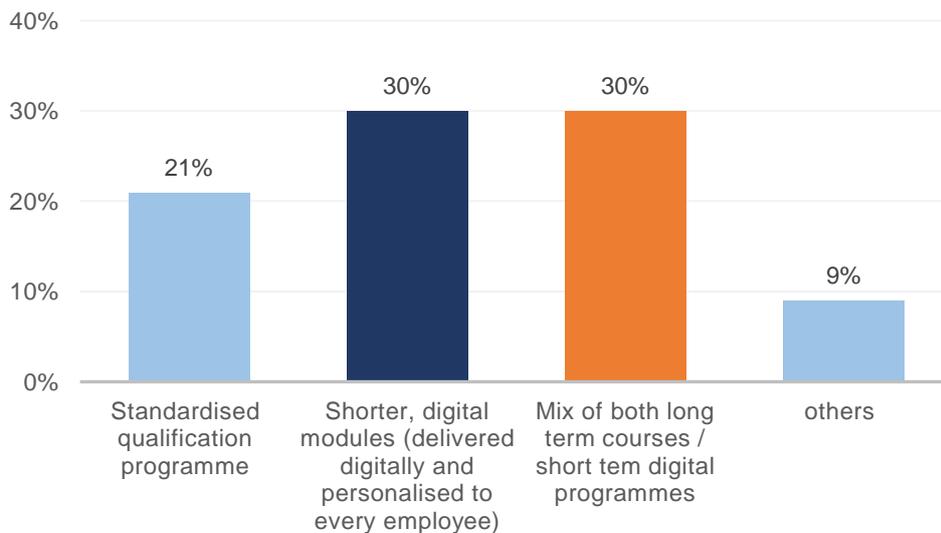
Q) For entry level roles, what qualifications are Indian employers looking for?



Most respondents chose an undergraduate degree (55%) as the key qualification they are looking for in prospective entry level employees. This is to be expected but what was surprising was the number of companies that chose technical/vocational qualifications (47%) as well as professional certification (36%). While 34% wanted their employees to have a postgraduate degree.

This shows that there is a significant demand for vocational qualifications and professional certifications which are areas that the UK excels at. The UK's Technical and Vocational Education and Training sector (TVET) is well established and highly renowned and has been significantly helping employers in the UK and beyond to achieve growth and prosperity in a global economy. This USP should be showcased better to capture the attention and interest of Indian corporates.

Q) What kind of programmes and modules are Indian corporates looking for to upskill and reskill their workforce?



Both the shorter digital modules and a mix of long and short training courses were equally popular with our Indian businesses ---- which implies that they are open to considering various options for reskilling and upskilling their staff to keep pace with a rapidly evolving 21st century workplace.

The need for varied skills is significant -- at all levels of an organisation and at all stages of an employee's career. To cater to this huge demand, employers would benefit immensely from striking up partnerships with a plethora of different UK training providers.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Much more potential for greater industry-academic partnerships between Indian businesses and UK universities.
- Indian companies should expand the number of UK universities they work with by overlooking the overall global rankings and focusing instead on their specialist subject ranking and unique areas of expertise.
- UK universities should prioritise developing personal relationships with Indian businesses and leverage their alumni as ambassadors to gain an edge over their competitors.
- Research tends not to be as high a priority for Indian companies as it should be. Huge scope to explore research collaborations between Indian corporates and UK universities.
- Opportunity for UK HEPs to ramp up graduate placements and internships with Indian MNCs
- Lack of technical & communication skills are some of the main challenges faced by Indian employers. Indian graduates from UK universities would be a good fit since they are well equipped with these skills.
- Good appetite amongst Indian employers for online training programs and vocational qualifications to upskill their employees, which opens up opportunities for UK training providers.
- Gaps in understanding exist on both sides - UK universities need to build a better brand profile in India and showcase their capabilities and strengths while Indian businesses should communicate their needs better to UK universities.
- Regular dialogue and interaction between industry and academia will help both stakeholders overcome their challenges, build resilience and achieve sustainability in the years to come.

CONCLUSION

This survey was undertaken to gauge the appetite of Indian corporates and UK universities to engage more actively with each other with a view to forging broader and more mutually beneficial partnerships. The results and insights from this questionnaire are proof that there is indeed willingness and potential to do more together – a promising starting point.

The next step therefore is to bring both these stakeholders together in a conducive environment and spark the initial dialogues and interactions which will then pave the way for new and impactful partnerships. For this to happen successfully, both parties will be required to do things a bit differently – they will have to step out of their comfort zones, keep an open mind and meet each other halfway where necessary.

In practice, this means that Indian companies will need to move away from their tried and tested methods of working only with a small select group of top tier academic institutions – a formula which has not yielded the results they had hoped for. Instead, they should start to give more importance to a wider cross-section of world-class UK universities, overlooking the overall global ranking and focusing instead on their specialist subject ranking and unique areas of expertise. This will require Indian businesses to undertake a level of information gathering to acquaint themselves better with these institutions and their capabilities. In addition, it is advisable that they prioritise other forms of engagement in addition to internships and graduate placements such as joint research, executive MBAs and PhD sponsorships with these universities.

The universities for their part, should commit to and invest more resources in building and promoting their brand profile in country, highlighting their USP at every opportunity and continue to be more

innovative in developing direct contacts and personal relationships with the Indian companies on their wish list. They should leverage their alumni network and develop strong links with the wider Indian industry network to gain a robust foothold in this community.

Exploring new cross-sectoral tie-ups with new partners will generate fresh outcomes which will be advantageous for both businesses and academic institutions. The more successful these partnerships, the greater the number of players that will be motivated to enter the fray thus generating momentum and setting in motion a self-fulfilling virtuous cycle.

The post pandemic era that we find ourselves in now makes it even more imperative for organisations across the spectrum (industry and academic) to come together and establish win-win linkages to stay ahead of the curve. Companies and education providers can no longer afford to operate in isolation if they are to build resilience to withstand global forces and achieve prosperity and sustainability now and, in the years, to come.