Just Certified or Job Ready: Dual-Perspective Study of Student Perception and Employer's Expectations

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Abstract
This study investigates the complex relationship between certification programs and employability, using a mixed-methods, dual-perspective design. Quantitative data from 451 final-year students and recent graduates in Sivaganga district explore motivations for pursuing certifications, confidence in skill application, and job readiness. Concurrently, qualitative insights from interviews with 10 HR professionals across Tamil Nadu provide an industry-centric lens on certified candidates. Findings reveal a substantial divergence among the certification perceives students as essential for the employability, on that 35.9% were reported a job opportunities linkage to them. Most students were lacking with the confidence in applying the certified skills, with only 8.42% were felt job ready. Factor analysis emphasizes two motivational domain such as Career oriented goals and socio-psychological pressures like a peer influence and parental expectations. However, employers were prioritizing the hands-on experiences, soft skills and demonstrable outputs over credentials alone. And this study reveals the psychological corollaries of certification driven culture, including stress, imposter syndrome, and diminished intrinsic motivation. These findings underscore the urgent need to reform certification frameworks by integrating experiential learning, reflective practices, and emotional scaffolding. The study calls for systemic educational change that repositions certifications from symbolic achievements to authentic indicators of real-world competence. Practical recommendations are offered for educators, employers, and policymakers to align certification ecosystems with employment realities. Future research should examine longitudinal impacts of certification-driven training on job performance and extend this inquiry to diverse socio-geographic contexts for broader generalizability.
Keywords: Certification and Employability, Student Motivation for Certifications, Employer Expectations vs Student Perception, Credential Value in Hiring Decisions, Mixed Method Research, Psychological Impact of Certifications.

Introduction

In today's rapidly evolving knowledge economy, certifications have emerged as prominent markers of employability, often perceived as fast-track substitutes for formal degrees or long-term training. While several initiatives, including those spearheaded by the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC), have aimed to address the skill gap, questions persist regarding the real-world employability of certified individuals. The proliferation of short-term, skill-based courses especially those offered online has created new avenues for learners to showcase competence, particularly in technology, business, and professional services sectors visitation over cognitive an (Chakroun, et al. 2019). Despite the proliferation of certified programs, employers often report that many graduates lack the competencies required for productive employment. This raises critical concerns about the effectiveness of certification-based skill development in addressing industry needs especially within a rapidly industrializing state like Tamil Nadu. In India, the adoption of certifications has grown markedly in semi-urban and rural districts such as Sivaganga, driven by limited local industry exposure, heightened academic competition, and increasing pressure to become "job-ready" in a credential-driven labour market (Saxena, & Tripathi, 2020). In Tamil Nadu, a state known for its educational emphasis, over 64% of engineering and management students seek at least one certification before graduation (AICTE, 2022). Within Sivaganga district specifically, government data show that less than 28% of graduates secure employment within six months of course completion, prompting students to seek certifications as a compensatory strategy. Despite being a Tier-3 district with limited direct access to corporate hubs, Sivaganga has seen a 32% increase in online course enrolments since 2020, especially through platforms like Courser a, Simplilearn, and NPTEL (TNEGA, 2023). However, despite their popularity, the actual impact of certifications on employability remains a subject of growing debate. Students often view certifications as stepping stones to better employment prospects, enhanced resumes, and faster placements.

Despite the growing popularity of certification programs among students, a clear disconnect remains between what students believe these credentials offer and what employers actually expect. Many students view certifications as a strategic investment to gain a competitive edge in the job market. However, employers are increasingly sceptical about their real-world value. Concerns have been raised about the superficial nature of learning in many certification courses, the persistent lack of essential soft skills, and underwhelming on-the-job performance even among those who hold multiple credentials (LinkedIn, 2020; McKinsey & Company, 2021b). This creates a "Credential Paradox" where the certification does not necessarily translate into workplace readiness or hiring advantage (Brown, & Hesketh, 2004; Smith, 2018). In Sivaganga region this problem layered more. Among the students and Job seekers career decisions were shaped mere solely on the genuine Interest of individuals. And those interest were highly because of the Socio-Cultural things like a-parental expectations, peer influence and the social media narrative. The act of Credential programs becomes an outcome of a desire to fulfil a societal requirement, to find the internal ambiguities, and directs to the employability in a fluctuating labour market. In the context of Certifications, perception management contains more and less priority for the skill mastering. What complicates the situation further is the relative silence of industry voices particularly HR professionals and recruiters from key sectors like IT, banking, manufacturing, and education across Tamil Nadu in academic discussions about certification and employability. These professionals, who play a direct role in hiring and evaluating candidates, have valuable insights that are frequently overlooked in mainstream education and policy research.

Numerous studies have examined the broader trends in skill development, but there remains a notable gap in context-specific, impact-oriented assessments focusing on how certification outcomes correlate with actual job readiness at the state level. Tamil Nadu, despite its strong industrial base and proactive skilling initiatives, has not been the subject of in-depth empirical scrutiny in this area. The NSDC's recent report on skill gaps in Tamil Nadu presents a valuable opportunity to bridge this

gap by offering real-time data for regional analysis. However, few studies have taken a diagnostic approach to identify root causes of the gap between certification and employability using this dataset. This study addresses the critical gap by employing a mixed-methods, dual-perspective approach. Quantitative data were collected from 451 students in Sivaganga district to explore their motivations, psychological drivers, and expectations from certification programs. And the Qualitative part was compiled from the Interviews with the Ten different sectoral HRs across Tamil Nadu, were makes a clear understanding about the candidates with certifications how perceived in real time hiring environment. The important components such as Self-confidence on skill application, retaining knowledge, job preparedness and validation of certification on hiring were examined in this study. And understanding the students' aspirations with the employers, this study offers the clear view about the certification employability connections. Finally, this study holds a critical and timely questions:1Are certifications preparing students and job seekers for the realities of work, or merely creating an illusion of readiness?; 2 what policy or institutional interventions bridge the identified gap between certification and job readiness mindset?; 3And importantly how this psychological participation is playing crucial role in such kind of certification acquiring behaviour. The findings aim to inform educators, training providers and career counsellors seeking to design more holistic, industry responsive skill development pathways that move beyond superficial credentialing.

Literature Review

National Studies confirm this trend. The study by (Sharma, & Rani, 2021) states over Sixty Eight percent of Tier II Indian city undergraduate students believe that certifications increase the visibility of job market. Similarly, the report "Aspiring minds" (NER, 2020) indicated that less than 25% of engineering graduates are considered employable, prompting many to pursue post-degree certifications as a form of skills compensation. Divergence Between Student Expectations and Employer Realities: Although certifications are widely viewed as career enablers, research increasingly highlights a disconnect between student perceptions and employer expectations. (Brown, & Hesketh, 2004) describe this as a "positional competition," where qualifications inflate but do not necessarily translate into real advantage. (Gauthier, 2022) echoes this by highlighting the "credential paradox" certifications enhance visibility but do not guarantee workplace readiness. Psychological and Social Influences on Certification Behaviour: The certification grabbing mindset is not purely developed by the strategic perspective, this mindset also developed by socio-cultural dynamics. This study found that students' decisions were significantly shaped by peer pressure, parental expectations, and fear of missing out (FOMO) consistent with the observations from the theory of Self-Determination (Deci, & Ryan, 2000). Students often pursue certifications as a means of social conformity rather than intrinsic growth, which aligns with Festinger's (1954) theory of social comparison. The Rise of Certification Culture: The rapid online learning growth through platforms and MOOCs has democratized access to certification, making them an appealing option for students and job seekers alike. (Chakroun, et al. 2019) argue that global trends toward modular, skill-based education frameworks are replacing traditional degree-centric models. This transformation is particularly evident in semi-urban and rural Indian districts, such as Sivaganga, where students increasingly view certifications as fast-track solutions to employment limitations (Saxena, & Tripathi, 2020).

International Study (Chugh, & Ruhi, 2018) reveals the data, these students increasingly pursue credentials due to the influence of social platforms and peer benchmarks, often leading to psychological burnout. (Clance, & Imes, 1978) described this scenario as imposter syndrome a feeling of inadequacy despite external success which was also reflected in this data, where students expressed low confidence in skill application and knowledge retention. (Carnevale, et al. 2013a) further assert that in the U.S., students who combine certifications with applied experience have higher placement and income outcomes than those who only accumulate credentials. Similarly, in the Indian context, (Ghosh, & Gupta, 2022) found that job offers were more strongly associated with hands-on exposure than with online certification completion.

Research Objectives

- Identify students' motivations for earning certifications.
- Evaluate student confidence in certified subject mastery.
- Analyse factors driving the certification trend.
- Examine employer attitudes toward certifications.
- To explore the psychological implications of the certification-focused mindset among students.

Hypothesis

- There is no significant association between students field of study and their motivation to pursue certification for improving job prospects.
- Peer pressure not significantly influences students' decision to pursue certifications across different educational levels.
- Students' certification decision is not significantly affected by parental and mentor influence based on their educational qualification.

Methodology

A study employs a comprehensive Mixed method design to examine the student's motivation of pursuing and grabbing the certification rather than the real-time application and perceived employability from both employer and student perspectives. The logic of adopting this research approach is aimed to triangulate the breadth of quantitative trends with the qualitative insights. This approach enables broad understanding about the dynamics of certification and employability. (Creswell, & Plano Clark, 2018).

The quantitative part involves 451 respondents in the profile of final year students and job seekers in Sivagang a district, Tamil Nadu, using a structured questionnaire measured on a Likert scale. The questionnaire covered key components including motivations for pursuing certifications, self-confidence in applying certified skills, perceived job readiness, and the influence of peers, mentors, and digital culture on certification decisions. The desired tool was pre-tested in a pilot study with 30 participants and validated by the results using the Statistical Software SPSS (v23). Its internal consistency was confirmed through Cronbach's Alpha, yielding a strong reliability coefficient of 0.899, which meets the threshold for social science research (Nunnally,

& Bernstein, 1994; Tavakol, & Dennick, 2011). To ensure representativeness, a Stratified random sampling technique was used, dividing the population based on education level (diploma, undergraduate, and postgraduate) and ensuring inclusion across gender and field of study. The participants included students in their final year or those who had recently graduated, which positioned them at crucial stages of employment transition and thus capable of offering reflective insights.

Complementing the survey data, the qualitative phase employed semi-structured interviews with 10 HR professionals from sectors such as IT, education, banking, and manufacturing across Tamil Nadu. These participants were selected through purposive sampling, focusing on those involved in talent acquisition and skill assessment. The interviews explored employer attitudes toward certifications, their expectations from certified candidates, and the perceived value of skills versus credentials in hiring decisions. A protocol was developed to ensure consistency, yet flexibility was maintained to explore emergent themes. All interviews were synthesised using the thematic analysis by using based on the works of (Braun, V., & Clarke, 2006), which allowed for the identification of recurrent patterns, such as the preference for practical experience, skepticism toward superficial credentials, and emphasis on soft skills. For the Atlas.ti software which was framed for the qualitative analysis. Using the software the core concepts were coded and make a quotes to get an effective result from the interview data from the different sectoral recruiters across the Tamil Nadu.

Quantitative Results on Motivation and Employability Readiness

The study presents a well-balanced demographic profile that strengthens the reliability of its findings on certification and employability. The majority of participants fall within the 22–25 age group, capturing students at key career decision-making stages. Gender distribution is inclusive, with representation from male (51.4%), female (40.8%), and non-binary (7.8%) individuals, reflecting diverse perspectives. Educationally, the sample spans undergraduates (50.3%), postgraduates (34.1%), and diploma holders (15.5%), offering insights across

academic levels. The fields of study are varied, with Commerce/Management and Engineering being the most represented, followed by Science, IT & Computer Science, and Arts/Humanities enabling comparisons across disciplines in relation to certification relevance.

Most participants are in their final year (62.08%) & have recently graduated (37.92%), positioning them to provide both anticipatory and retrospective views on certification value. Overall, the sample's diversity in age, gender, education, field, and academic stage provides a comprehensive foundation for understanding student motivations and employer expectations within the Sivaganga district.

The reliability analysis of the scale reveals strong internal consistency. A total of 451 respondents were included in the analysis, with none excluded, indicating complete and usable data for all participants (100% inclusion rate). The computed Alpha value is 0.899, which is states excellent in social science research. Therefore, the instrument used for the study is statistically reliable and suitable for further analysis and interpretation (DeVellis, 2016; Tavakol, & Dennick, 2011).

Students Motivational Analysis – Data Narration

Understanding why students choose certification programs over traditional skill development avenues requires looking beyond the numbers and into the motivations shaped by identity, academic context, and social environment. By employing Chi-Square analysis on cross-tabulated data between motivational factors and key demographics, this study offers a multidimensional view of student decision-making in the Sivaganga district.

Motivation by Identity: The data reveals that gender identity plays a significant role in shaping certification motivations ($p < 0.05$ across all tested factors). Motivations such as enhancing CVs, improving job prospects, and responding to peer trends were found to significantly differ between male, female, and non-binary respondents. Social influences including advice from parents/mentors and exposure to promotional content also differed notably across gender lines. These findings underscore the socialized nature of decision-making, where personal identity intersects with cultural expectations (Singh, & Hamid, 2020).

Academic Backgrounds Shape Aspirations: When motivations were analysed against educational qualifications, clear differences emerged. Students at different academic levels diploma, undergraduate, and postgraduate prioritize certifications for varying reasons. The perception that certifications provide quicker knowledge acquisition ($\chi^2 = 8.41$, $p = 0.014$) and boost employability ($\chi^2 = 7.70$, $p = 0.021$) was more pronounced among postgraduates, possibly due to their proximity to the job market.

Disciplinary Differences: The study fields play an important role in shaping students motivations for pursuing certifications. Evidenced by the Chi-square test ($x^2 = 13.11$, $p=0.010$). The hypothesis (H1) states that there is no significant association between academic disciplines of the students and their motivation to pursue certifications for job prospects was rejected statistically. And the findings reveals that Commerce and Engineering students are more strategically driven and viewing certifications as tools to enhance employability and increase visibility in campus placements. In other words, students from the Humanities exhibit a stronger inclination toward self-betterment and often express doubted Ness about the value of institutional learning and credentialism. This disciplinary divergence underscores the varying roles certifications play across academic streams, ranging from career advancement mechanisms to instruments of intellectual exploration.

Timing is Everything: Comparing final-year students to recent graduates reveals motivational shifts influenced by immediate career pressures. Final-year students prioritized certifications to gain campus placement advantages and align with peer behaviour, while recent graduates leaned more heavily on enhancing their resumes and addressing gaps in college-acquired knowledge ($p < 0.01$ across multiple variables).

The Anatomy of a Certification Decision

These findings explains that the decision to pursue certification is far from one-dimensional. It is shaped by a complex interplay of identity, academic exposure, relevance of field, and proximity to employment. While few were motivated by self-improvement and personal interest, others respond to societal pressures or gaps in institutional learning.

The Confidence Gap: A Four-Dimensional Perspective on Certification Impact

Understanding the true impact of certification programs requires more than tracking enrolment figures or completion rates it demands a close examination of how learners internalize, retain, and translate their certified knowledge into real-world readiness. To capture this dimension, the study assessed four distinct yet interconnected expressions of student confidence: application ability, knowledge retention, explanatory clarity, and job readiness.

Application Ability: More than half of the respondents (55%) reported low confidence in applying their newly acquired skills, while 41% indicated moderate confidence. Only a combined 4% expressed high or very high confidence, pointing to a widespread sense of hesitation. These results suggest that although students are completing certifications, a majority are unsure of their practical utility a finding consistent with studies highlighting gaps between theoretical instruction and hands-on competency (Chakroun, et al. 2019; Oliver, 2024). This application barrier highlights a significant challenge: certification without confidence may not yield employability.

Knowledge Retention: A startling 61.86% of students admitted to low confidence in their knowledge retention, while 35.47% reported moderate retention. Fewer than 3% believed they retained the content at a high or very high level. This data raises concerns about the depth and durability of learning in short-term programs. The findings resonate with critiques that such courses often prioritize credential acquisition over cognitive anchoring (DeVellis, 2016). The high drop-off in self-perceived retention could be likened to a leaky bucket rapidly filled but unable to hold lasting substance.

Explanatory Clarity: Explaining a concept is often seen as the litmus test of true understanding. However, 50.33% of students reported low confidence in this area, with only 14.2% expressing high confidence and 6.43% very high confidence. With less than 21% of students able to articulate certification content confidently, the concern shifts from mere knowledge possession to communicative competence a skill highly valued in modern workplaces (Tavakol, & Dennick, 2011). This reflects a shallow learning curve where students can complete courses but struggle to own or explain their learning, echoing employer concerns around real-world readiness (Chakroun, et al. 2019).

Job Readiness: While 54.54% of students expressed moderate confidence in their job readiness, a significant 37.04% remained low in confidence. Only 8.42% believed their certifications made them truly job-ready. This reinforces the theme of cautious optimism, where students appreciate the value of certifications but are acutely aware of their limitations in a competitive job market. Their responses signal that certification is seen less as a career passport and more as a boarding pass useful, but insufficient without further preparation or experience.

The cumulative insight from these four questions forms a multidimensional confidence map that reflects a subtle dissonance between educational effort and employability outcomes. Although certifications are designed to signal readiness and capability, the student voice in this study tells a more complex story one marked by ambition, hesitation, and realism. This nuanced confidence profile deepens our understanding of why employers may hesitate to trust certifications at face value (Gauthier, 2022). It also reveals that students themselves are aware of this gap and are actively navigating it, which supports the study's central claim: there exists a misalignment between the symbolic value of certifications and the functional confidence they instil.

Driven Factor that Insists the Students to Earn a Certification

Before embarking on the exploration of what truly drives students to pursue certifications, a foundational check was essential akin to ensuring the machinery is well-oiled before a complex operation. The results of the KMO measure and Sphericity of Test served as this calibration tool, confirming the dataset's readiness for deeper excavation. A KMO value of 0.928classified as 'marvellous' (Kaiser, 1974) signalled exceptionally compact correlations among variables, validating the use of factor analysis. The yielded sphericity test result states statistically significant chi-square (χ^2 = 1615.364, df = 120, p < .001), affirming the presence of meaningful

interrelationships (Bartlett, 1954). These preliminary diagnostics paved the way for a robust exploratory factor analysis.

Mapping the Motivational Landscape: Through the lens of factor analysis, student motivations unravelled like a map of interwoven terrains, revealing two major continents of influence each populated by clusters of variables with high communalities and thematic consistency.

Continent I: The Engine of Opportunity and Self-Development, which reflects a multi-modal force where personal ambition, career alignment, platform design, and digital presence converge.

Key Drivers: (Career Signals) Recognition by employers (0.664), industry demands (0.621), company tie-ups (0.771), and placement support (0.702) collectively underscore how students perceive certifications as bridges to employment (Hair, et al. 2014). (Digital Trust) Social media influence (0.665), online flexibility (0.717), and platform branding (0.626) demonstrate that accessibility and perceived credibility are crucial entry points (Dhawan, 2020). (Self-Branding) Building a LinkedIn profile (0.759), control over learning (0.750), and accelerated program duration (0.626) reflect students' growing emphasis on portfolio-building and personal growth (Selwyn, 2016).

The study's analysis of Continent II: The Pressure Zone of Social Expectations reveals that students' motivations to pursue certifications are heavily shaped by social dynamics rather than purely intrinsic ambition or external market demands. Key influencers include peer pressure (factor loading = 0.735), fear of missing out (FOMO) = 0.720, parental expectations = 0.642, and mentorship influence = 0.709 all pointing to a strong psychological and cultural force in shaping academic behaviour. These findings reflect the Indian socio-educational context, where social media narratives and authoritative voices play a decisive role in educational decision-making.

Hypothesis H$_1$, which posited that peer pressure does not significantly influence certification decisions across education levels, is rejected. Peer influence varies by academic year and is particularly strong among final-year students, who often pursue certifications as a social necessity. To understand how family and mentor influence varies across academic levels, the study examined Hypothesis H, which proposed that students' decisions to pursue certifications are not significantly influenced by parental and mentor guidance based on their level of education. However, the results told a different story. Through factor analysis and observed interaction trends, it became evident that both parental (loading = 0.642) and mentor influence (loading = 0.709) played a significant role especially among certain student groups leading to the supporting the alternative hypothesis.

The influence, however, was far from uniform. Undergraduate students were found to be particularly responsive to external guidance, often making certification choices based on parental expectations, family norms, or institutional mentorship. Being relatively early in their academic and career journey, they tend to rely on trusted authority figures in the absence of real-world job exposure. On the other hand, postgraduate students exhibited a more strategic and self-directed approach. Their decisions were more likely to be guided by career alignment, industry relevance, and long-term specialization, reflecting a maturity that aligns with Erikson's theory of identity development, where independence and self-awareness grow over time.

These insights confirm that certification decisions evolve with academic maturity. The findings advocate for a tiered guidance model offering structured mentorship for early-stage learners and more personalized, career-focused support for advanced students. Institutions that adapt their guidance strategies accordingly can better support students' career readiness in a way that matches their stage of growth and decision-making capacity.

The Architecture of the Student's Intentions: Nine latent components emerged, explaining a cumulative variance of 94.36%, with the first four contributing over 52% alone. The post-rotation simplification further sharpened thematic clarity, supporting a two-factor solution that encapsulates most motivational nuances (Field, 2013). The bifurcation between practical/professional and social/psychological motivations echoes existing educational psychology models, particularly the duality of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (BANDURA, et al. 2000).

Dual Perspective Extraction: The findings reveal a dual pulse beating at the heart of student certification behaviour: one driven by strategic self-improvement and career readiness, and the other by societal expectations and digital conformity. In the context of Sivaganga's evolving educational ecosystem, understanding these pulses is essential for educators, employers, and policymakers to design relevant, equitable, and responsive certification programs.

Certification and the Employability Equation: A Mixed Signal from the Frontlines

In the shifting landscape of graduate employability, certifications are often promoted as accelerators of job readiness. Yet, the lived experience of students tells a more complex story one that straddles aspiration and ambiguity. Data from this study indicate that while certifications hold symbolic value, their tangible impact on job outcomes remains contested. Only 35.9% (n=162) of respondents reported receiving a job interview or offer attributable to their certification. A sizable 64.1% (n=289) did not experience any direct employment benefit, suggesting that certifications, though popularized in career guidance narratives, are not always rewarded with immediate labour market traction. This finding resonates with (Brown, & Hesketh, 2004) concept of the "positional competition," where degrees and credentials are often abundant but insufficient in signalling job readiness alone.

Perceptions of employer emphasis on certification during recruitment were diverse. 37.5% (n=169) believed employers place a very high weight on certifications, while 31.9% (n=144) and 30.6% (n=138) perceived moderate and minimal weight, respectively. This fragmented perception landscape hints at a "credential paradox"certifications are seen as valuable, yet their role in actual hiring decisions remains uncertain. This aligns with (D. Smith, 2018) critique of "credential inflation," where additional qualifications add less value in saturated labour markets.

When asked whether they would Recommend certification courses to peers, a revealing 64% (n=287) chose a neutral stance ("Neither Likely nor Unlikely"), while only 29% (n=132) were "Somewhat Likely," and a sparse 7% (n=32) were "Very Likely" to recommend them. This cautious outlook may reflect an emerging realism among students that while certifications can enhance resumes, they do not automatically open doors. Similar sentiments have been observed by Jones & Thomas, (2020), who noted that peer endorsement of skill-based programs often depends on perceived return on investment, especially in under-resourced or regional contexts.

In essence, the data suggests that certifications operate in a "Gray zone"they are pursued with hope but viewed with critical realism. While they may strengthen a candidate's portfolio, their effectiveness in isolation appears limited. This underlines the need for integrated employability frameworks where certifications are complemented by experiential learning, mentorship, and employer engagement bridging the gap between what students earn and what employers expect.

Qualitative Analysis: Employer Perspectives on Certifications

As certification programs gain popularity among students seeking to boost employability, employer perspectives suggest a growing divergence in perceived value. In key sectors such as IT, banking, manufacturing, education, and marketing across Tamil Nadu, recruiters express increasing doubts about the real-world utility of certifications. Insights derived from semi-structured interviews reveal that while certificates may aid in initial candidate screening, they fall short in assessing practical competence. Thematic analysis of employer feedback identified six key themes that reflect shifting hiring preferences toward applied skills, soft competencies, and industry-aligned learning experiences.

Thematic Insights from Recruiters: A Reality Check on Certifications and Career Readiness

As students and job seekers strive to enhance their employability, the importance of certifications is often highlighted in career counselling sessions, online job forums, and peer discussions. However, what do recruiters those making the actual hiring decisions really think about certifications? Based

on recurring themes from recruiter interviews and employer feedback, we explore six critical insights that every student must understand before relying too heavily on certificates alone.

"Certificates help us shortlist, but they don't help us decide."Recruiters commonly use certifications as preliminary screening tools, especially in large companies that employ Applicant Tracking Systems (ATS). These systems scan resumes for keywords, and certifications can help a resume pass through this initial stage (Cappelli, 2019; Leuck, 2021) However, "once candidates reach the interview phase, certificates lose their weight unless they're backed by demonstrable skills." Studies have shown that employers prioritize practical experience and applied competencies over credentials alone during final hiring decisions (LinkedIn, 2020; McKinsey & Company, 2021a). "A certificate may get your foot in the door, but it won't guarantee a seat at the table."

"I hire projects, not paper." Recruiters consistently prioritize candidates with real-world experience such as internships, freelance work, capstone projects, and hack a thons over those with only certifications. These practical experiences demonstrate initiative, problem-solving skills, and the ability to apply knowledge, which are seen as more reliable indicators of job readiness than academic achievements alone (NACE, 2023). Additionally, such experiences foster workplace adaptability and help assess a candidate's fit within organizational culture (Andrews & Higson, 2008b). Studies further show that students with practical exposure are more likely to secure job offers and earn higher starting salaries, highlighting the critical role of experience in enhancing both employability and professional maturity (Gault, et al. 2010).

"Learning but not applying that's the real problem" Recruiters consistently raised a critical issue on the gap between knowledge acquisition and its practical application. While certifications typically indicate that a student has been exposed to certain technical or conceptual knowledge, they often fail to validate whether that knowledge has been internalized, understood in context, or can be effectively used in workplace settings.

In many cases, "certified candidates performed well on paper but struggled during practical evaluations, case interviews, or live problem-solving sessions". This disconnect suggests a troubling trend overemphasis on certification as an endpoint, rather than as a stepping stone to real capability. As noted in the literature, students often equate acquiring credentials with being job-ready, but true employability arises from the ability to solve problems, think critically, and produce outcomes in real-world conditions (Jackson, 2016).

This gap is particularly visible in technical fields such as software development, data analytics, and finance, where theoretical learning is abundant but applied skill is essential. In Real time scenario, studies have shown that employers frequently encounter certified candidates who are unable to perform basic job functions without significant additional training (Hora, et al. 2016). In such cases, certifications lose their credibility as indicators of readiness. Moreover, many online and short-term certification programs focus heavily on content delivery through passive methods like video lectures and quizzes. Without project-based components, simulations, or internships, these programs fall short in developing applied competencies (Wessel, 2020). Recruiters, therefore, place limited trust in certificates unless they are backed by tangible outputs like a portfolio, a prototype, a case analysis, or internship experience.

"Technical knowledge is only one part of the picture" In the evolving landscape of employment, technical expertise alone is no longer sufficient to guarantee career success. "Recruiters consistently report that while certifications can indicate a certain level of technical proficiency, many certified candidates fall short when it comes to soft skills the interpersonal and cognitive abilities that enable effective interaction, decision-making, and adaptability in professional settings". Soft skills such as communication, team collaboration, problem-solving, adaptability, and critical thinking have emerged as decisive differentiators in the hiring process, especially in roles that require interaction with clients, teamwork across departments, or leadership responsibilities. Employers argue that these skills often outweigh technical skills in long-term job performance, especially in dynamic or high-stress environments (Cimatti, 2016). A significant number of hiring managers express concern that

students entering the workforce despite holding multiple certifications struggle with active listening, articulating thoughts clearly, working in teams, or handling real-world ambiguity. This results in a skills-performance gap, where academic or certificate-based qualifications fail to translate into job-readiness (Andrews & Higson, 2008a).

The education system teaches, but doesn't prepare. One of the most persistent themes emerging from recruiter feedback is the disconnect between academic curricula and industry expectations. While colleges and universities often focus on theoretical knowledge, industry demands practical application, critical thinking, adaptability, and real-time problem-solving skills. As one recruiter aptly summarized, "The education system teaches, but doesn't prepare."Academic programs continue to emphasize standardized syllabi, textbook-based instruction, and exam-centric assessments. While these may build a foundation of conceptual knowledge, they rarely simulate the complexity and ambiguity of real-world work environments (WEF, 2020). Recruiters emphasize that candidates are often technically sound but lack the ability to apply their knowledge in fluid, fast-paced, and collaborative professional settings.

A 2019 McKinsey report noted that nearly 40% of employers globally find that new graduates are not adequately prepared for the workforce, citing gaps in problem-solving, communication, and adaptability (McKinsey & Company, 2021b). Similarly, the National Employability Report – Engineers 2020 in India found that only 20% of engineering graduates are employable in roles that require decision-making and problem-solving skills, which are highly valued in the industry (NER, 2020).

The core of this mismatch lies in the lack of experiential and project-based learning in traditional education systems. Classroom education tends to be linear and instructor-led, while industry scenarios demand initiative, collaboration, and solution-oriented thinking under pressure. Live projects, internships, mentorship programs, and simulation-based learning are more aligned with how professionals actually work and yet, they remain underutilized or optional in many academic institutions. Recruiters are not simply looking for

knowledge; they are looking for job-readiness, which includes both technical and behavioural competencies the ability to communicate, make decisions, work in teams, and deal with uncertainty (Andrews & Higson, 2008a). This gap becomes particularly evident during interviews and probation periods when even highly certified candidates struggle to perform in dynamic team environments.

"Build a portfolio. Apply what you learn. Certifications without context mean nothing."Recruiters consistently advise students to cultivate a personal brand by creating portfolios, GitHub repositories, blogs, or LinkedIn posts that clearly demonstrate how they have applied their learning in practical settings. This approach aligns with research indicating that demonstrable skills and practical experience are often valued more by employers than certifications alone (Carnevaleet al. 2013b). Certifications, while useful, have the greatest impact when paired with concrete evidence of their application, such as a project developed during or after a course or a real-world solution influenced by newly acquired knowledge (Anders, 2020). "Building a portfolio serves as a dynamic narrative, showcasing a student's ability to translate theoretical knowledge into tangible outcomes." It also supports the development of a personal brand, which is increasingly recognized as vital for career advancement in competitive job markets (Labrecque et al. 2011). Platforms like GitHub or LinkedIn offer students the means to present their skills interactively and network with potential employers or collaborators (Kietzmann, et al. 2011).

Decoding the Psychological Consequences of Certification Obsession

While certifications are often positioned as fast-tracks to employability, this study reveals that the relentless pursuit of credentials can come at a significant psychological cost. Among final-year students and recent graduates in Sivaganga district, a prevailing sense of pressure to accumulate multiple certificates has led to heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and emotional fatigue. These feelings are not rooted solely in ambition but are deeply influenced by peer competition, parental expectations, and institutional messaging, creating a psychologically

taxing environment where self-worth is often equated with credential count. (Deci & Ryan, 2000). One of the most troubling outcomes identified in this research is the widespread presence of imposter syndrome a condition in which students, despite having earned certifications, internally doubt their competence and fear being exposed as inadequate (Clance & Imes, 1978) The study's findings substantiate this concern: only 8.42% of respondents felt job-ready, and over 60% reported poor knowledge retention, indicating a disconnect between external achievement and internal assurance. Certifications, rather than fostering confidence, may instead amplify self-doubt when students fail to internalize their learning meaningfully.

The psychological drivers of this phenomenon are further illuminated by the influence of peer pressure and FOMO (Fear of Missing Out). Social media platforms often act as amplifiers of competitive comparison, leading students to view certification not as a path to personal growth, but as a social requirement for acceptance and relevance (Chugh & Ruhi, 2018; Festiger, 1954). In such cases, certification becomes a tool for belonging rather than becoming, contributing to what Erikson (1968) would term an identity diffusion, where students lose connection with their intrinsic motivations and developmental goals.

This dynamic has profound implications for educators, institutions, and policy designers. Promoting certifications without emotional scaffolding or reflective integration risks undermining student well-being and reducing learning to a performative task. To counteract this, the study recommends the following: 1 Embed reflective practices into certification programs to help students align learning outcomes with personal and career values (Kolb, 2015). 2 Integrate career counselling and mental health services to support students in navigating academic pressures and career uncertainties.3Redesign certification modules to emphasize experiential learning, problem-solving, and confidence-building over symbolic achievement (Eraut, 2004a; Tavakol, & Dennick, 2011).

Discussion

This study reveals that certifications, though widely pursued, often serve more as symbols of reassurance than genuine indicators of employability. While 35.9% of students reported job interviews linked to certifications, 64.1% found no tangible employment benefit, reinforcing the "credibility illusion" surrounding credentials. Employers largely treat certifications as resume filters, not proof of job readiness. A deeper issue lies in the "confidence gap"only 8.42% of students felt job-ready post-certification, with many struggling to retain knowledge or apply skills in real contexts. This signals a shift from learning for mastery to learning for validation. Factor analysis further exposes how peer pressure, parental expectations, and social media drive certification choices more than intrinsic motivation. Employers emphasized practical readiness over paper qualifications. They prioritize portfolios, problem-solving, and communication attributes often absent in short-term certification programs. This gap reveals a generation of students who are credential-rich but context-poor. Psychologically, the pressure to earn certifications has triggered stress and imposter syndrome, especially when achievements don't translate into competence. Thus, the act of getting certified risks becoming performative without experiential grounding.

Implications and Recommendations

To address the widening disconnect between certification attainment and actual employability, this study underscores the importance of targeted, stakeholder-specific interventions. For educators and training providers, there is a pressing need to embed experiential learning into certification programs. This can be achieved through the integration of live projects, industry simulations, and case-based modules that promote application over rote learning. Additionally, greater emphasis must be placed on soft skills development such as communication, teamwork, and adaptability by designing modules that assess and reinforce these competencies. Reflective practices should also be embedded post-certification to enable learners to internalize their skills and align their learning with career values.

From a policy standpoint, policymakers and accreditation bodies must take an active role in regulating and auditing certification content to ensure

that it yields measurable, real-world outcomes. Quality assurance frameworks should encourage application-based components while discouraging purely theoretical instruction. Incentivizing partnerships between certification bodies and industries through funding or tax benefits can further strengthen the relevance of certification curricula. Additionally, the psychological well-being of students pursuing multiple certifications should not be overlooked. Integrating mental health awareness, especially regarding the emotional pressures of credentialism, into educational policy is essential for creating a more balanced learning ecosystem.

At the Institutional Level, colleges and career cells have a critical role in enhancing students' career readiness. This can be achieved by promoting portfolio-building practices such as maintaining GitHub repositories, LinkedIn profiles, or personal blogs that demonstrate applied competencies. Regular career-readiness workshops should be conducted to help students transition certified knowledge into job contexts. Moreover, institutions must adopt tiered guidance models that provide differentiated mentorship based on the academic maturity of students whether they are diploma holders, undergraduates, or postgraduates to ensure that support strategies align with their developmental and career stages.

Employers and recruiters too, must recalibrate their engagement with certification frameworks. Rather than treating certificates as standalone indicators of readiness, recruiters should actively collaborate with educational institutions to co-create certification content that reflects real-world expectations. Emphasis must be placed on demonstrable outputs such as projects, portfolios, and prototypes over symbolic credentials. Offering micro-internship opportunities that align with certification content can serve as practical training grounds, helping students bridge the gap between learning and performance.

Finally, students and job seekers must be empowered to approach certifications more strategically. Instead of being driven by social influence or peer competition, learners should align their certification choices with long-term career goals. Importantly, they must be encouraged to apply what they learn in real-time whether through internships, freelance work, or personal projects to build contextual competence. At the same time, maintaining emotional well-being is crucial; students should seek career counselling and engage in reflective practices to avoid burnout and imposter syndrome. Altogether, these recommendations aim to reposition certifications from symbolic achievements to authentic indicators of job readiness and personal growth.

Conclusion

This mixed-methods study mindfully explored the interlinks between certification and employability by combining quantitative insights from 451 students and recent graduates in Sivaganga district with qualitative perspectives from 10 HR professionals across Tamil Nadu. The findings confirm a stark divergence between the perceived and actual value of certifications. Although widely pursued as a strategic tool for employment, only 35.9% of students reported job opportunities linked to certifications, and just 8.42% felt genuinely job-ready, resulting a substantial "confidence gap."

The quantitative analysis reveals that students are often driven by career ambitions and socio-psychological pressures such as peer influence, parental expectations, and fear of missing out (FOMO). Factor analysis grouped these drivers into two major clusters: career-oriented motivations and social conformity pressures, confirming that extrinsic forces often outweigh intrinsic interest in skill development. And, the study illuminated deep-seated psychological impacts tied to the credential-focused culture, including stress, imposter syndrome, and diminished intrinsic motivation, particularly among students navigating a competitive and symbol-driven academic environment. Confidence in applying certified skills was low across domains over 60% of students lacked confidence in knowledge retention and skill application, challenging the assumption that certification equates to competence.

Qualitative interviews with HR professionals corroborated these concerns, emphasizing that certifications alone are insufficient indicators of employability. Recruiters prioritize practical experience, problem-solving capacity, and soft

skills over credential accumulation. Certifications, in their current form, are often viewed as resume screeners rather than reliable indicators of workplace readiness. Instead, portfolios, internships, and demonstrable projects were cited as more authentic signals of competence.

Taken together, these findings expose a crucial misalignment between student aspirations and employer expectations. Certification, while symbolically significant, fails to function as a standalone guarantee of employability. The study advocates for a systemic shift toward experience-integrated certification programs that emphasize application, reflection, and psychological readiness. It calls upon educators, policymakers, institutions, and recruiters to restructure certification frameworks to bridge the certification-employability divide transforming them from static qualifications into authentic indicators of competency, confidence, and career preparedness.

Limitations and Scope: This study was geographically limited to the Sivaganga district and HR professionals were within the Tamil Nadu, that which may restrict the generalizability using this. In addition, the rapid evolution on expectations of industries and standards of certifications warrants a cautions in extrapolating these findings beyond the regional context.

Directions of Future Research: In future the studies could explore the longitudinal impacts of certification on actual performance in job, cross regional comparison or international perspectives, and investigates the digital credentials and micro-certifications role in fill the gaps. Experimental interventions involving experiential learning models embedded within certification programs may also provide valuable insights into their long-term efficacy.

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