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# Predictors of Employability among University Students: The Role of Emotional Intelligence and Communication Competence

**Mrs. Rachna Saxena[1]**

[1] *Centre for Teaching, Learning and Development, TeerthankerMahaveer University, Delhi Road, Moradabad-244001, Uttar Pradesh, India.* rachnasaxena7260@gmail.com

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**ABSTRACT**

*Graduate employability is shaped not only by academic qualifications and technical knowledge but also by a cluster of interpersonal competencies that employers consistently rank among their top hiring criteria. This paper reviews and synthesizes recent theoretical and empirical literature on two such competencies, emotional intelligence (EI) and communication competence, and their role as predictors of employability among university students. Drawing on established EI models and communication competence theory, the paper proposes a conceptual framework in which EI and communication competence jointly shape interpersonal and social effectiveness, which in turn predicts graduate employability. The review finds consistent evidence that EI dimensions, particularly self-awareness, motivation, and social skills, are positively associated with employability outcomes across disciplines ranging from business to healthcare and education, and that communication competence is frequently identified as the single strongest soft-skill predictor of employability. Evidence further suggests that communication competence may partially translate the benefits of emotional regulation into visible, employer-relevant behaviour, consistent with a mediating role. The paper discusses cross-disciplinary variation in these relationships, proposes a set of testable hypotheses, and offers recommendations for embedding EI and communication skill development into university curricula to strengthen graduate employability outcomes.*

**Keywords:** *emotional intelligence, communication competence, graduate employability, higher education, soft skills, interpersonal effectiveness.*

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## 1. Introduction

University graduates today enter a labour market in which technical qualifications alone are widely regarded as insufficient for securing and sustaining employment. Employers consistently report that recent graduates, while often strong in discipline-specific knowledge, fall short in interpersonal and communication-related competencies, a gap that has been described as the "employability skills gap" (Clarke, 2017, as cited in Western Michigan University employability study, 2024). Within this gap, two constructs have attracted particular research attention: emotional intelligence (EI), the capacity to perceive, understand, and regulate one's own and others' emotions, and communication competence, the ability to

convey and interpret messages effectively across verbal, nonverbal, and written channels (Mayer et al., 1997; Spitzberg&Cupach, 1984).

Graduate employability itself is increasingly understood as a multidimensional construct that extends beyond simply obtaining a first job to encompass a graduate's ongoing capacity to gain, maintain, and progress in employment (Tomlinson, 2017). Influential models such as CareerEDGE position emotional capability alongside career development learning, degree subject knowledge, and generic skills as a core input into perceived employability (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007). Communication, meanwhile, is repeatedly identified in employer surveys as the most valued, and most frequently lacking, soft skill among graduating students across disciplines (Measuring Communication Skills Imperative study, 2023; Western Michigan University employability study, 2024).

This paper examines the role of EI and communication competence as predictors of employability among university students. It addresses three questions: (a) how are EI and communication competence theoretically linked to graduate employability, (b) what does the empirical evidence show about their independent and joint predictive roles, and (c) how do these relationships vary across academic and professional disciplines. Drawing on this evidence, the paper proposes a conceptual model and a set of hypotheses to guide future empirical testing, and concludes with implications for curriculum design.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Conceptualizing Graduate Employability

Graduate employability has been defined as a set of achievements, skills, understandings, and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations (Yorke, 2006, as cited in Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007). The CareerEDGE model operationalizes this definition by identifying five interacting components: career development learning, work and life experience, degree subject knowledge, generic skills, and emotional intelligence, all mediated by reflection and self-evaluation that together produce self-efficacy, self-confidence, and self-esteem (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007). This model is notable for explicitly embedding emotional intelligence as a core, rather than peripheral, component of employability, a positioning that has shaped much of the subsequent research reviewed in this paper.

Complementary employability capital frameworks distinguish between human capital (individual knowledge and skills), social and cultural capital (relationship-based competencies such as communication and teamwork), and identity capital, arguing that soft skills such as communication and emotional and social intelligence operate primarily through the social and cultural capital pathway to enhance employability (Soft skills competency framework study, 2025).

### 2.2 Emotional Intelligence: Theoretical Foundations

Emotional intelligence has been conceptualized through several overlapping but distinct models. The ability model, developed by Mayer, Salovey, and colleagues, defines EI as a set of interrelated abilities: perceiving emotions accurately, using emotions to facilitate thought, understanding emotional meanings, and managing emotions in oneself and others (Mayer et al., 1997). Mixed models, most notably Goleman's framework, broaden this definition to include personal and social competencies such as self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills, framing EI as a set of learnable workplace competencies rather than a purely cognitive ability (Goleman, 1998). A third influential approach, the trait or mixed model proposed by Bar-On, conceptualizes EI as a cross-section of interrelated emotional and social competencies that influence overall ability to cope with environmental demands (Bar-On, 2006).

These models converge on several dimensions repeatedly identified as relevant to employability, including self-awareness, motivation, empathy, and social skills, which recur

across the studies reviewed in Section 2.4 (Role of EI on Final Year Students' Employability, 2022).

### 2.3 Communication Competence: Theoretical Foundations

Communication competence is commonly defined as the ability to communicate in a manner that is both effective, achieving desired outcomes, and appropriate to the social and relational context in which communication occurs (Spitzberg&Cupach, 1984). In employability research, this construct is typically operationalized across verbal, nonverbal, written, and listening dimensions, with particular attention to a graduate's ability to adapt communication style to different audiences, including interviewers, supervisors, and clients (Impact of Communication Competence on Graduate Employability study, 2025). Communication competence is frequently grouped alongside interpersonal skills within broader soft-skills frameworks, although recent research cautions that the two constructs, while related, are theoretically distinct: communication skills target specific tasks and behaviours, whereas interpersonal skills reflect a broader relational capacity that may structurally mediate the translation of internal emotional regulation into outward communicative behaviour (Healthcare EI-Communication study, 2025).

### 2.4 Emotional Intelligence and Employability: Empirical Evidence

A substantial body of empirical research links EI to graduate employability outcomes. A study of final-year undergraduates found that the self-awareness, motivation, and communication dimensions of EI were each significantly and positively associated with employability, with communication identified as the single most influential dimension among those examined (Role of EI on Final Year Students' Employability, 2022). Research on preschool education majors in China similarly found a positive relationship between EI and employability, concluding that EI constitutes a core, rather than supplementary, component of students' career competence (Li, 2023).

Research situated in business education contexts has extended these findings. A study of 478 business students and alumni in Italy found that higher EI competence was associated with a greater likelihood of being perceived as a good fit for, and subsequently employed within, innovative organisations, suggesting that EI's employability value may be amplified in dynamic, less hierarchical work environments (Ciroi et al., 2026). A separate study of undergraduate business students found that both EI and self-efficacy were positively related to perceived employability, while noting that university curricula alone did not significantly improve perceived employability, implying that EI-specific development, rather than general coursework, may be necessary to realize these benefits (George Fox University EI/Self-Efficacy study, 2021).

### 2.5 Communication Competence and Employability: Empirical Evidence

Communication competence is among the most consistently supported predictors of graduate employability in the literature. A study of university graduates in the Maldives found that communication skill significantly predicted employability, with the communication-skill model explaining a statistically significant proportion of variance in employability outcomes (Impact of Communication Competence on Graduate Employability study, 2025). Research among business graduates has similarly found that communication, interpersonal, and thinking skills were positively and consistently related to employability perceptions, with communication skill showing one of the strongest relationships among the soft skills examined (Moderating Effect of EI on Skills-Employability study, HRMARS).

Beyond direct effects, communication competence has also been examined as a driver of related career outcomes. A study of prospective sport managers found that communication competence and career awareness jointly explained a substantial proportion of variance in entrepreneurial tendencies, framing entrepreneurial orientation as a component of broader employability rather than a separate construct, with career awareness mediating the

relationship between communication skills and entrepreneurial outcomes (Career Awareness Mediation study, 2025).

### 2.6 The Interrelationship between Emotional Intelligence and Communication Competence

Although EI and communication competence are frequently studied as parallel predictors of employability, a smaller body of research has examined how they relate to one another. A study of healthcare university students found that interpersonal skills structurally mediated the relationship between EI and communication skills, suggesting that internal emotional regulation does not translate directly into effective outward communication but is instead channelled through a prior behavioural translation into interpersonal competence (Healthcare EI-Communication study, 2025). This finding is consistent with soft-skills competency frameworks that position emotional and social intelligence as foundational to the subsequent development of communication, teamwork, and conflict-resolution competencies within employability-focused curricula (Soft skills competency framework study, 2025).

Taken together, this literature suggests a plausible sequential relationship in which EI shapes a graduate's capacity for interpersonal and social effectiveness, which is then expressed and made visible to employers through communication competence, an idea formalized in the conceptual model presented in Section 3.

## 3. Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

Building on the theoretical and empirical literature reviewed above, this paper proposes a conceptual model in which emotional intelligence and communication competence jointly predict graduate employability, both directly and through their combined contribution to interpersonal and social effectiveness. Figure 1 illustrates this hypothesized model.

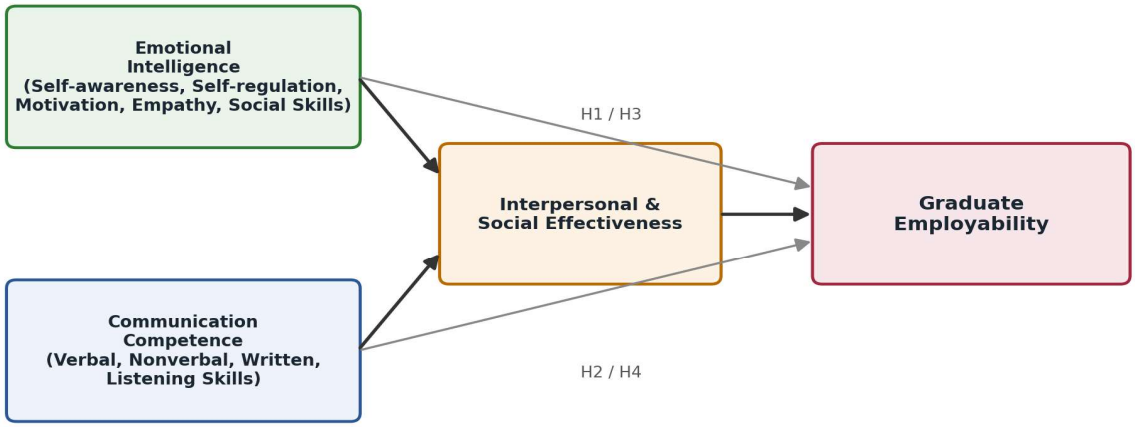



**Figure 1. Hypothesized conceptual model linking emotional intelligence and communication competence to graduate employability. H1-H4 denote the hypotheses outlined below. Model developed by the author based on the literature reviewed in Section 2.**

Based on this model, the following hypotheses are proposed for future empirical testing:

H1: Emotional intelligence is positively associated with graduate employability.

H2: Communication competence is positively associated with graduate employability.

H3: Emotional intelligence is positively associated with interpersonal and social effectiveness, which in turn predicts graduate employability.

H4: Communication competence is positively associated with interpersonal and social effectiveness, which in turn predicts graduate employability.

This model treats interpersonal and social effectiveness as a proximal mechanism through which the more abstract, internally oriented construct of EI and the more behaviourally observable construct of communication competence jointly influence employability, consistent with the mediating pattern identified in healthcare-education research (Healthcare EI-Communication study, 2025) and with the CareerEDGE model's treatment of emotional capability as embedded within, rather than separate from, generic employability skills (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007).

## 4. Cross-Disciplinary and Contextual Variation

The relationship between EI, communication competence, and employability does not appear uniform across academic disciplines or professional contexts. In business and management education, EI and communication competence are frequently framed as complementary to analytical and technical skills, with research emphasising their joint role in enabling graduates to navigate team-based, client-facing, and leadership-oriented roles (Ciroi et al., 2026; Moderating Effect of EI on Skills-Employability study, HRMARS). In healthcare education, by contrast, communication and interpersonal skills are framed as safety-critical competencies in their own right, given that miscommunication in clinical contexts carries direct consequences for patient outcomes, which may explain why healthcare-focused research places particular emphasis on the structural pathway from EI through interpersonal skills to communication competence (Healthcare EI-Communication study, 2025).

In education-focused disciplines, such as preschool and vocational teacher training, EI has been linked not only to employability but also to broader professional competencies such as classroom management and cross-cultural communication, suggesting that in people-facing professions, EI's employability value may be partly realized through its contribution to domain-specific relational skills rather than through generic workplace communication alone (Li, 2023; Vocational university English education study, 2025). Sport management and entrepreneurship-oriented programs illustrate a further variation, in which communication competence appears to operate through career awareness as a cognitive-developmental mechanism, converting interpersonal competence into entrepreneurial orientation rather than acting as a direct antecedent of employability (Career Awareness Mediation study, 2025).

## 5. Summary Tables

Table 1 summarizes the core constructs examined in this review and their representative theoretical sources. Table 2 synthesizes key findings from selected empirical studies on EI, communication competence, and graduate employability across disciplinary contexts.

*Table 1. Key Constructs and Representative Theoretical Sources*

| Construct | Core Dimensions | Representative Source(s) |
|---|---|---|
| **Emotional Intelligence (EI)** | Self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, social skills | Mayer et al. (1997); Goleman (1998); Bar-On (2006) |
| **Communication Competence** | Verbal clarity, nonverbal fluency, active listening, written communication, audience adaptation | Spitzberg&Cupach (1984); Ariana (2010) |
| **Graduate Employability** | Career development learning, work experience, degree subject knowledge, generic skills, emotional capability (CareerEDGE) | Dacre Pool & Sewell (2007); Tomlinson (2017) |

*Table 2. Summary of Selected Empirical Studies on EI, Communication Competence, and Graduate Employability*

| Study | Sample / Context | Key Finding |
|---|---|---|
| Li (2023) | Preschool education majors, China | Positive association between EI and employability; EI identified as a core predictor of career competence. |
| Role of EI on Final Year Students' Employability (2022) | Final-year undergraduates, mixed disciplines | Self-awareness, motivation, and communication dimensions of EI significantly predicted employability; communication was the strongest influencing factor. |
| Ciroi et al. (2026) | Business students & alumni, Italy (N = 478) | Higher EI competence associated with greater perceived fit and likelihood of employment in innovative firms. |
| George Fox University EI/Self-Efficacy Study (2021) | Undergraduate business students, USA | EI and self-efficacy both positively related to perceived employability; curriculum alone was insufficient without EI development. |
| Healthcare EI–Communication Study (2025) | Healthcare university students | Interpersonal skills mediated the relationship between EI and communication skills, translating emotional regulation into outward communication competence. |
| Moderating Effect of EI on Skills–Employability (HRMARS) | Business graduates, Malaysia | Communication, interpersonal, and thinking skills positively related to employability perception; EI examined as a moderating variable. |
| Impact of Communication Competence on Graduate Employability (2025) | University graduates, Maldives | Communication skill significantly predicted employability ($R^2$ = .193); communication identified as a key soft-skill driver. |
| Career Awareness Mediation Study (2025) | Prospective sport managers | Communication competence and career awareness jointly explained 79% of variance in entrepreneurial tendencies, a component of employability. |
| Soft Skills Competency Framework (2024) | Graduate interns, multi-sector | Communication, interpersonal relations, and emotional/social intelligence identified as core drivers within a soft-skills employability framework. |

## 6. Discussion

The literature reviewed in this paper converges on three broad conclusions. First, both emotional intelligence and communication competence are consistently, though not always equally, associated with graduate employability across a wide range of disciplinary contexts, lending support to H1 and H2. Communication competence, in particular, is frequently identified as the single strongest soft-skill predictor of employability, appearing both as a direct predictor and as a dimension within broader EI frameworks (Role of EI on Final Year Students' Employability, 2022; Impact of Communication Competence on Graduate Employability study, 2025).

Second, emerging evidence supports a sequential or mediated relationship between EI and communication competence, rather than treating the two constructs as fully independent predictors. The finding that interpersonal skills structurally mediate the EI-communication relationship among healthcare students lends preliminary support to H3 and H4, suggesting that universities seeking to improve graduate employability may benefit from sequencing EI-focused interventions before or alongside communication skills training, rather than treating them as parallel, unrelated curricular components (Healthcare EI-Communication study, 2025).

Third, the strength and expression of these relationships vary meaningfully by discipline. While the underlying constructs, self-awareness, empathy, social skills, and communicative adaptability, appear relevant across fields, their employability value is realized differently in client-facing business contexts, safety-critical healthcare contexts, and relationally intensive education contexts. This suggests that curriculum designers should avoid a one-size-fits-all approach to EI and communication skills training, instead tailoring interventions to the specific interpersonal demands of each discipline's target profession.

## 7. Implications for Curriculum and Practice

Several practical implications follow from this review. First, given consistent evidence that curriculum exposure alone does not reliably translate into improved perceived employability, universities should consider dedicated, experiential EI and communication skills training, such as role-play, simulated client or patient interactions, and structured peer feedback, rather than relying on passive instruction (George Fox University EI/Self-Efficacy study, 2021).

Second, because communication competence may function as a visible expression of underlying EI, assessment and feedback systems should give students opportunities to practise translating emotional awareness into observable communicative behaviour, for example through recorded presentations, negotiation exercises, or reflective communication journals, consistent with the mediating pathway identified in Section 2.6.

Third, given the disciplinary variation discussed in Section 4, EI and communication curricula should be adapted to the relational demands of each field, emphasising client- and team-based scenarios in business programs, safety-critical and empathy-focused communication in healthcare programs, and developmentally appropriate interpersonal skills in education programs. Embedding these competencies within discipline-specific coursework, rather than isolating them in generic "soft skills" modules, may improve both student engagement and employability outcomes (Soft skills competency framework study, 2025).

## 8. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This review is subject to several limitations. Most of the studies synthesized here rely on self-reported measures of EI, communication competence, and perceived employability, which may be influenced by social desirability bias and may not correspond closely to employer-assessed competence or actual employment outcomes. Future research should incorporate multi-source data, including employer or supervisor ratings and objective employment outcomes, to validate self-reported findings.

In addition, while this paper has proposed a conceptual model and a set of hypotheses based on the reviewed literature, these relationships have not been tested within a single, unified empirical study using consistent measures across disciplines. Future research should employ longitudinal and cross-disciplinary designs, using validated EI and communication competence instruments alongside objective employability indicators such as time to employment, starting salary, or employer-rated job performance, to rigorously test the mediated pathways proposed in Hypotheses 3 and 4.

## 9. Conclusion

Emotional intelligence and communication competence consistently emerge as significant predictors of graduate employability across disciplines, though the strength, form, and interrelationship of these predictors vary by professional and educational context. This paper has synthesized theoretical models and empirical evidence to propose a conceptual framework in which EI and communication competence jointly shape interpersonal and social effectiveness, which in turn predicts employability outcomes. For higher education institutions, these findings underscore the importance of moving beyond passive curricular exposure toward experiential, discipline-sensitive development of emotional and communicative competencies, equipping graduates not only with technical knowledge but with the interpersonal effectiveness that employers consistently identify as central to workplace success.

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